Susana Onega

Metafiction and Myth in the Novels of Peter Ackroyd

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Considered to be one of the most original and fertile British writers of the 1980s, Peter Ackroyd (1947–) is also well known as poet, biographer and reviewer. He came to public notice after the publication of his second novel, *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde* (1984), which won the Somerset Maugham Prize, and of his biography of T. S. Eliot (1984), which was awarded the Whitbread Prize and Heinemann Award. His third novel, *Hawksmoor* (1985) won the Whitbread Prize and the Guardian Fiction Prize, and after the publication of *Chatterton* (1987), which also won the Whitbread and the Guardian Fiction Prizes and was shortlisted for the Booker Award, he was widely acclaimed as the best British writer of his generation.

In this first full-length study of Peter Ackroyd's nine novels to date, Susana Onega analyses in depth their recurrent structural and thematic traits, showing how they grow out of the tension created by two apparently contradictory tendencies. On the one hand, there is Ackroyd's metafictional tendency to blur the boundaries between storytelling and history; to emphasize the linguistic component of writing; and to underline the constructedness of the world in a way that aligns him with other postmodernist writers of what Linda Hutcheon has called "historiographic metafiction." And on the other hand there is Ackroyd's attempt to achieve mythical closure, expressed, for example, in his fictional treatment of London as a mystic center of power. This mythical element evinces the influence of high modernists like Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot, and links Ackroyd's work to writers of the transition to postmodernism, such as Lawrence Durrell, Maureen Duffy, Doris Lessing, and John Fowles.

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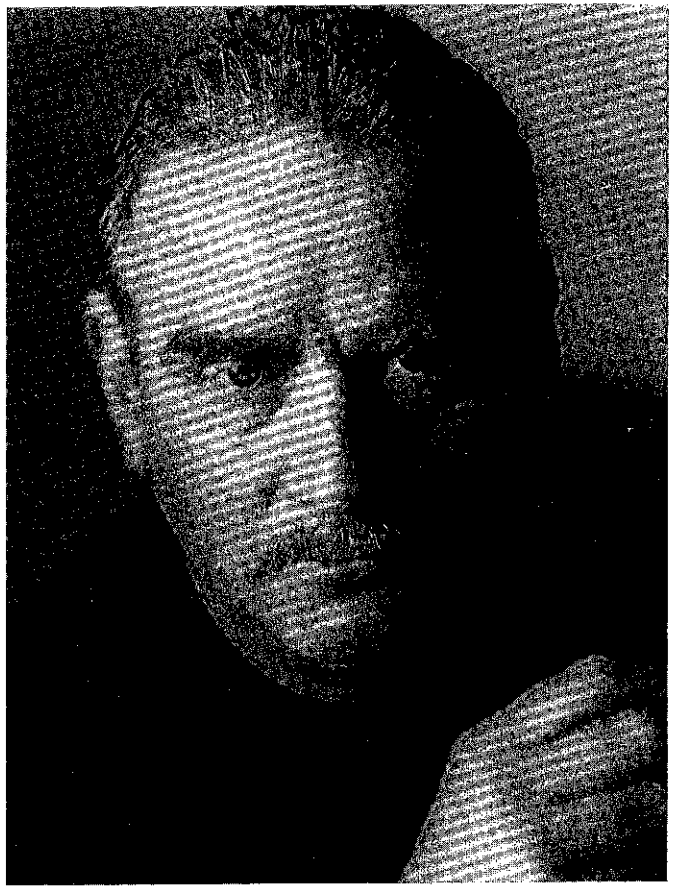

Peter Ackroyd

SUSANA ONEGA

METAFICTION AND MYTH IN THE NOVELS OF PETER ACKROYD

DTO. DE FILOLOGIA INGLESA Y ALEMANA
FACULTAD DE FILOSOFIA Y LETRAS
ZARAGOZA

CAMDEN HOUSE

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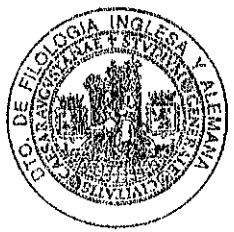
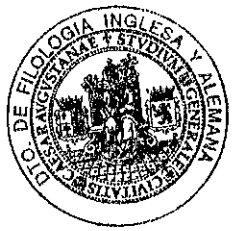
For Paco. He cares.



May God us keep, from
Single vision and Newton's sleep

William Blake



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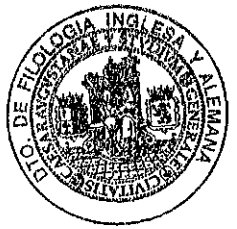

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S. O.
November 1998

Introduction

PETER ACKROYD CAME TO PUBLIC NOTICE ON the literary scene after the publication of his second novel, *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde* (1983), which won the Somerset Maugham Prize, and of his biography *T. S. Eliot* (1984), which was awarded the Whitbread Prize and Heinemann Award. His third novel, *Hawksmoor* (1985), won the Whitbread Prize and Guardian Fiction Prize, and, after the publication of *Chatterton* (1987), which was shortlisted for the Booker Prize, he was universally acclaimed as the best British writer of his generation. In a short survey of contemporary European fiction written in 1989, Peter Lewis sums up the general opinion when he states that, just as at the end of the 1970s Martin Amis and Ian McEwan were claimed by some to be the authentic voices of their generation, so at the end of the 1980s Julian Barnes and Peter Ackroyd seem to occupy a similar position (71).

Julian Barnes's *Flaubert's Parrot* (1984) and Peter Ackroyd's *Hawksmoor* and *Chatterton* may be described as accomplished examples of historiographic metafiction, the kind of self-conscious, heavily parodic and experimental historical novel that, according to Linda Hutcheon, is the only kind of fiction that truly fulfils the contradictory poetics of postmodernism. For Hutcheon, whereas metafiction is a late modernist phenomenon, the combination of metafiction and history produces a new effect: the leveling of history and literature to the same status of human construct, evincing a similar linguistic nature. Characteristically, historiographic metafictions differ from traditional historical novels in that the former do not seek historical accuracy and realistic verisimilitude but, on the contrary, challenge the separability of the two discourses, expressing what Hutcheon describes as "a longing for the traditional relish in story telling while simultaneously underlining the fact that this return is problematic" (1988: 124–25). According to Hutcheon, the birth of this world-wide literary trend is a result of the anti-patriarchal shift in world-view that took place in the late 1960s and 1970s in the Western world and that, in the field of literature, gave rise to the development of fringe or marginal trends such as gender and ethnic literature, as well as to anti-rationalist and experimental literary

trends such as North-American fabulation and Spanish-American magic realism.

Lawrence Durrell's *The Alexandria Quartet* (1957–1960) and John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969) are notable early examples of British historiographic metafiction. But, as I contended elsewhere (Onega, 1993), the trend itself did not become really productive in Britain until the 1980s, with the publication of Graham Swift's *Waterland* (1983), Julian Barnes's *Flaubert's Parrot* (1984), Jeanette Winterson's *The Passion* (1985) and *Sexing the Cherry* (1989), Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus* (1985), Rose Tremain's *Restoration* (1989) and Charles Palliser's *The Quincunx* (1989), other influential works are John Fowles's *A Maggot* (1986), Lawrence Durrell's *Avignon Quintet* (1974–1985), and William Golding's trilogy: *Rites of Passage* (1980), *Close Quarters* (1987), and *Fire Down Below* (1989).

Interestingly, the writers born after the Second World War prove to have many biographical traits in common: Peter Ackroyd, who was born in West London in 1949, with a Catholic working-class background, studied at Clare College, Cambridge (1968–71) and Yale (1971–1973) and has always combined his literary career with that of editor: he was Literary Editor (1973–1977) and later Joint Managing Editor of *The Spectator* (1978–1988), and he is currently Chief Book Reviewer for *The Times* (1986). He is an expert in Modernist literature and has written several nonfiction books, including a critical study, *Notes for a New Culture* (1976), and five biographies: *Ezra Pound and His World* (1980), *T. S. Eliot* (1984), *Dickens* (1990), *Blake* (1995), and *The Life of Thomas More* (1998). Graham Swift, also born in 1949, studied English at Cambridge and began a doctoral dissertation on Dickens at York, before combining writing with teaching in London. Julian Barnes was born in 1946 and educated in London and Oxford. He worked as a lexicographer on the *Oxford English Dictionary* and as a journalist in *The New Statesman* and *The Sunday Times* and has been television critic of *The Observer*. Rose Tremain, besides having performed numerous television and radio plays, has worked as a teacher of creative writing at the University of East Anglia and as a literary critic, reviewing regularly for the radio. Although Jeanette Winterson, born in 1959, is younger and has a somewhat different background (she was brought up as a strict Pentecostal Evangelist and drifted from one manual job to another for a time), she also has a University training, reading English at Oxford before working in the theatre and becoming a full-time writer. Charles Palliser is likewise an Oxford graduate who has taught twentieth-century fiction and poetry at Strathclyde University.

In other words, the British writers of historiographic metafiction of the 1980s combine in themselves artistic creativity with the critical awareness provided by University training in Oxford or Cambridge and, with the exception of Jeanette Winterson, by their experience as literary critics or teachers. They have, therefore, a thorough, specialist knowledge of both the literary tradition to which they belong and of literary theory. The novels they write are different in range and scope, as well as in interest and sensibility; yet all of them share a relish in irony and paradox, besides the metafictional foregrounding of their created worlds. Further, they all attempt to retreat into history and to blur the ontological boundaries between history, myth,[1] and fantasy.

As early as 1980, the American writer and critic John Barth published an article entitled "The Literature of Replenishment: Postmodernist Fiction," in which he described postmodernist fiction as the new literary form arising out of two exhausted forms: classic realism and modernism. His main contention was that, while modernist literature had evolved out of the exhaustion of realist aesthetics, postmodernist literature would stand in what can be described as a *parodic* relationship to both preceding literary movements: classic realism and modernism, which it would simultaneously use both as point of departure and of rejection. Accordingly, he described postmodernist literature as being characterized by a double, contradictory impulse to simultaneously *absorb* and *transcend* the two antagonistic literary forms preceding it. This contradictory impulse what Henry Breasley, the old painter in "The Ebony Tower" would describe as the need of contemporary art to stand both "as a homage and a kind of thumbed nose to a very old tradition" (Fowles, 1980: 23) is a basic trait shared by all British writers of historiographic metafiction. In this sense it is interesting to recall that the list of postmodernist writers proposed by John Barth in 1980 was exclusively made up of American and continental European novelists, with only one exception: John Fowles.[2]

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[1] Cf. Onega, 1993 and 1997, on the mythical impulse in British historiographic metafiction.

[2] The other writers he mentions are Barthelme, Bellow, Coover, Elkin, Pynchon, Vonnegut, Mailer, Barth himself, Nabokov, Butor, Robbe-Grillet, Cortázar, and Calvino (66).

From this perspective, the proliferation of British historiographic metafiction in the 1980s may be said to show British novelists catching up with a world-wide phenomenon that goes back not only to North-American fabulation but also to Spanish-American magic realism and to Gabriel García Márquez and Jorge Luis Borges in particular. García Márquez's *Cien Años de Soledad* (1967) may be seen as one of the first historiographic metafictions in which fantasy, myth, and archetype are consistently used as a richer alternative to realistic rationalism for the means of recovering a people's lost identity, while Borges's collection *Ficciones* (1944), with its archetypal labyrinths, magical mirrors of paper and ink, and Babel towers of printed matter, clearly foreshadows the metafictional and fantasy elements in the writings of novelists such as John Fowles, Jeanette Winterson, and Peter Ackroyd. This trend may, therefore, be described as part of a world-wide development related to Spanish-American magic realism and North-American fabulation that includes writers from all over the world: Milan Kundera, Heinrich Böll, Christa Wolf, Italo Calvino, Umberto Eco, E. L. Doctorow, Ian Watson, William Kennedy, Susan Daitch, Chris Scott, Rudy Wiebe, Timothy Findley, Margaret Atwood, J. Michael Coetzee, and Salman Rushdie.

Peter Ackroyd may then be said to occupy a central position within this trend not only because he has written nine historiographic metafictions in the short span of fourteen years (1982–1996), but also in the sense that, as Ackroyd himself insists, he represents the quintessential English historiographic metafiction, as can be seen from a simple comparison of *Hawksmoor* or *Chatterton* with *Flaubert's Parrot*. Indeed, for all their shared metafictional and parodic techniques, the sources of Barnes's and Ackroyd's imaginations are widely divergent. The literary tradition Barnes sets about to absorb and recast in *Flaubert's Parrot* has a strong French component and is more cosmopolitan or general European than English. By contrast, the tradition Ackroyd comes from is exclusively Anglo-Saxon, and the author refuses to attach the label "postmodernist" to his work, preferring to describe himself as the inheritor of a very innately English sensibility (Onega, 1996: 218), which is, basically, a visionary sensibility.

In a lecture entitled "London Luminaries and Cockney Visionaries" (1993a), Ackroyd explained that the phrase "Cockney visionary" was meant to express a particular London sensibility, "a living inheritance that has everything to do with the spirit of place and with the nature of the city." According to Ackroyd, this sensibility is best represented by music-hall comedians (or "monopolylinguists," as he calls them) such

as Dan Leno and Charles Mathews, but it is also present in the art of London novelists and playwrights such as Henry Fielding and Charles Dickens, painters such as J. M. W. Turner, and poets such as William Blake. It is still alive in the work of "modern London novelists such as Angela Carter, with her wonderful understanding of urban pantomime, of Michael Moorcock and his historical panoramas of London, of Iain Sinclair and his explorations of London mythology."

In a later lecture, entitled "The Englishness of English Literature" (1996), Ackroyd attempted to broaden the concept, moving from the description of a specific London sensibility to that of the English sensibility at large. His aim was to follow the lead of Sir Nikolaus Pevsner's *The Englishness of English Art* (1956), a book in which the German-born historian tried to delineate the intrinsic characteristics of English art forms as the product of England's unique cultural as well as geographical and climatological features. Similarly, Ackroyd's starting hypothesis was "to see if I can find Hogarth's line of beauty, that long gentle double curve which Pevsner saw as characteristic of English art, in English literature" (Pérez Guerra, ed., 1996: 11). Ackroyd admitted from the start that his attempt to define the "Englishness" of English literature was not a fashionable subject and suggested the only existing precedents: the tradition of the sixteenth-century debates about the foundation of Britain by Brutus and about the presence of an original giant race that survived the sinking of Atlantis; the eighteenth-century interest in the Druids and in Stonehenge as emblems of some lost English inheritance; and the mid-nineteenth-century fascination with an indigenous past, evinced in the foundation of The Early English Text Society and the Ballad Society (12). In short, the precedents he invoked (and endorses as his own) have a visionary and mythological component that strongly rings of Blake's antiquarianism.

Another feature of the true English sensibility is, according to Ackroyd, the love of ritual inherited from Catholicism, which survived the Reformation in such popular art forms as the ballad, music hall, pantomime, and vaudeville. Thus, for Ackroyd the true English spirit, the English genius, the English tradition is defined in nationalistic, patriarchal, Catholic (and also radical), and mythical terms, with "London Eternal" and the "Cockney Visionary Writer" occupying a central position. Consequently, Ackroyd's concept of the English literary canon "is not part of Leavis's Great Tradition or [Raymond] Williams' description of novels as 'knowable communities'" (15), but rather an ever-present and atemporal, orally transmitted canon that has been passed from father to son from the dawn of English civilization, the sum total

of English writers and artists "living for ever in the state of eternity called Albion" (Ackroyd, 1992: 358). These ideas, which may be said to suffuse Ackroyd's fiction in general, constitute the subject matter of his most controversial novel, *English Music* (1992).

Yet another element that should be taken into consideration when assessing Ackroyd's work as a whole is the fact that, although his reputation largely rests on his activity as novelist and biographer, his earliest writings were in the field of poetry. As the writer himself has explained, when he was a boy the only thing that interested him was poetry, and when he was at University all he really wanted to read and write was poetry (Onega, 1996: 209). As a Cambridge undergraduate Ackroyd soon showed an extraordinary intellectual curiosity, which he described in *Notes for a New Culture* as "the intellectual equivalent of bulimia" (1993b: 7), and which easily got him an Honours degree (a Double First) in English. As John Walsh has pointed out: "At Cambridge, his study technique was to immerse in every word written by or about an author who interested him, then distil from his reading a single essay of such nitric brilliance that his tutors and examiners could merely swallow hard and wonder about the safety of their tenure" (1992: 4). As Walsh goes on to explain, Ackroyd would soon show a similar overall acquisitiveness in his writing of novels and biographies.

At Cambridge, Ackroyd not only read omnivorously, he also became acquainted with, and was decisively influenced by a group of teachers and students such as J. H. Prynne, Andrew Crozier, Ian Patterson, and Kevin Strutford, who were actively involved in the "revitalization" of English poetry along the cosmopolitan and heavily experimental lines laid down by John Ashbery and the New York School of poetry. Ackroyd's first poetry collection, *Ouch* (1971), was published in *The Curiously Strong*, a university poetry journal founded at Cambridge in 1969 by Fred Buck and Ian Patterson to promote this new kind of experimental poetry. Since then, Ackroyd has published three more poetry collections: *London Lickpenny* (1973), *Country Life* (1978), and *The Diversions of Purley* (1987).

After Cambridge, Peter Ackroyd was granted a Mellon Fellowship that enabled him to spend two years at Yale University. During his stay there he wrote *Notes for a New Culture* (1976), a book of criticism that can be regarded as an early poetic manifesto, as it casts significant light on Ackroyd's own poetic as well as fictional practice. In it Ackroyd tries to systematize his own response to contemporary English culture and to formulate the basic tenets of his own attitude to literature. As he explains in the preface to the revised edition, "if anyone were foolish

enough to study all of my later books in sequence the biographies as well as the novels and the volumes of poetry I believe that the concerns, or obsessions, of *Notes for a New Culture* would be found in more elaborate form within them" (1993b: 8).

As the reviewer Peter Conrad has pointed out, the title of Ackroyd's book echoes T. S. Eliot's *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* (1948). Conrad notes, "Eliot, with characteristic irony, gave a hesitant, deferential title to his essay [although his] notes are not at all extemporary or provisional: they comprise a sermon." In contrast, Ackroyd's *Notes* "are not papal bulls but a series of dangerous missiles . . . designed to irritate his readers into reconsidering received opinions" (1976: 1524). With Eliot's essay in mind, therefore, and already showing his characteristic magpie acquisitiveness, Ackroyd sets out to trace the evolution of English culture from the Restoration to the twentieth century, comparing it to the different developments simultaneously taking place in Europe. His main argument is that contemporary English culture is declining (1993b: 11) because it has been incapable of keeping pace with the most innovative — or modernist — developments elsewhere, due to what he considers to be a backward attachment to humanist values.

Ackroyd draws a basic dichotomy between what he calls the "modernist" and the "humanist" cultural outlooks,[3] characterized in terms of their respective attitudes to self, world, and language. His main contention is that while for the humanists language is transparent a mere tool for the expression of human values and human nature, that is, an aesthetic instrument for the communication of the experience of the moral self for the modernists language is an autonomous entity, a self-begetting universe of discourse without referent or content. According

[3] This dichotomy echoes T. S. Eliot's distinction in "The Metaphysical Poets": "between the time of Donne or Lord Herbert of Cherbury and the time of Tennyson and Browning; it is the difference between the intellectual poet and the reflective poet." Eliot suggests that in the seventeenth century thought became separated from feeling by an increasing crudity of feeling. The metaphysical poets, like the Elizabethan and Jacobean dramatists and also like Dante and the thirteenth-century Tuscan school of lyric love poets, "possessed a mechanism of sensibility which could devour any kind of experience . . . in the seventeenth century a dissociation of sensibility set in, from which we have never recovered; and this dissociation, as is natural, was aggravated by the influence of the two most powerful poets of the century, Milton and Dryden." (1979: 2305).

to Ackroyd, aesthetic humanism reaches its peak in the 1930s and 1940s in the work of New Critics such as F. R. Leavis, John Crowe Ransom, and Cleanth Brooks, who define literature in aesthetic and moral terms as the linguistic expression of man, and criticism simply as the study of style. Aesthetic humanism informs the literature written by Georgian and Edwardian writers who postulate the morality and utilitarian nature of art. This tradition includes John Galsworthy, Leslie Stephen, and G. E. Moore and was continued in the 1950s by Movement writers such as Philip Larkin, Kingsley Amis, and John Wain.

The most important arguments against this theoretical position are raised by modernist writers such as James Joyce and Alain Robbe-Grillet, and by critics such as Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida. For such writers, aesthetic humanism is based on a false notion of the human individual — or subject — as a constant or identifiable essence or self. In fact, they contend, the subject is better described as a process, an interaction of material, historical, social, and psychological factors, each of which is in its turn determined by and forms part of numerous other processes. Likewise, where for the humanists language has a utilitarian function, for the modernists it becomes a self-sufficient and autonomous sign-system without meaning or referent. Taking writing — as opposed to speech — as the original linguistic form, Barthes substitutes the notion of text for that of literary genres and defines criticism as the metalanguage of literature, and literature itself as the science of language (115).

Throughout the book Ackroyd shows his contempt for aesthetic humanism and his admiration and respect for such modernist writers as Joyce, Robbe-Grillet, Prynne, and Ashbery, who sought a new kind of freedom by suggesting the "ability of literature to explore the problems and ambiguities of a *formal absolute* which will never be experience. [Even though these new literary] forms seem to proclaim the death of Man" (149, my emphasis). In other words, *Notes for a New Culture* helps us situate Ackroyd within the anti-realist, cosmopolitan, and experimental poetic trend that was emerging at the University of Cambridge while he was there as a student, as a reaction against humanism in general and against the Movement in particular, the mainstream British trend of the 1950s and 1960s which quickly came to represent the aims and attitudes of the new post-Second World War, Welfare State generation. As Blake Morrison (1980) has explained, the origins of the Movement go back to Oxford in the early 1940s, when a number of key friendships were made. The first and most important was that between Larkin and Amis, followed a little later by that between

Bruce Montgomery and John Wain. Described as a provincial, lower-middle class generation of scholarship-winning, Oxbridge educated university teachers, the members of the Movement were characterized by militant anti-romanticism, anti-experimentalism, and anti-cosmopolitanism, summarized in their deeply felt distaste for Dylan Thomas, the living emblem of everything they found ugly and immoral in the field of poetry. Deeply influenced by the Logical Positivist School of philosophy, of which A. J. Ayer's *Language, Truth and Logic* (1936) was the first exposition in the English language, Movement writers considered themselves realists and empiricists; they defended the transparent and utilitarian use of language, and contended that the vast majority of utterances produced by poets do have literal, paraphrasable meaning.

The circle at Cambridge where Ackroyd found himself between 1968 and 1971 was motivated by the desire to overturn this kind of neo-realist or humanist poetry — in Ackroyd's terms — along the modernist lines described in *Notes for a New Culture*, that is, by the radical redefinition of language and of self and world. As Ackroyd notes, in the poetry of Movement writers such as Philip Larkin, as well as in that of younger poets such as Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes: "Everything is mediated through a single level of language that transforms even apparently subtle statements into a dense and simplistic language of private experience" (127). Modernist poets such as Prynne, Ashbery, and O'Hara, by contrast, manage to create a unique space for the experience of subjectivity by shifting the emphasis from the fixed or central perspective of the lyrical "I" to the procedure of the poem itself.

In the kind of experimental poetry Ackroyd admires, the refusal to acknowledge the existence of any consistent or identifiable notion of subject is often expressed by means of baffling slips and shifts of viewpoint, the change of direction in mid-sentence and the resistance to giving a poem any identifiable perspective. Likewise, as self and world recede into the background or simply disappear, the poetry becomes poetry "'about language' and nothing else" (Lindop, 1989: 44). In other words, the poetry turns into "language poetry" as opposed to the "poetry of things," a poetry written on the assumption that poetry should not have the simple communicative function of everyday language, that it should not have any commonsensical or paraphrasable meaning, but rather work to illuminate itself. As Ackroyd explains in *Notes for a New Culture*, the refusal to accept the traditional notions of autonomous subject and transparent language inevitably leads one to postulate the arbitrariness and fictionality of poetry: "Since there is

nothing to be 'said', everything can be included; and since at the centre of the language is the active process of the poem itself, every external reference and object lies somewhere on the periphery. And this includes most of all, the ubiquitous and apparent 'I'" (1993b: 29).

Ackroyd's poetry is fully in line with this type of arbitrary and fictional language poetry.[4] His poems are recurrently built on allusion, parody, pastiche, and the ironic rewriting of earlier texts as language liberating mechanisms, creating what might be described as self-conscious linguistic palimpsests of the accumulated echoes of his favourite modernist predecessors: among others, Ezra Pound, W. B. Yeats, W. H. Auden, Dylan Thomas, James Joyce, and, above all, T. S. Eliot. However, in late poems such as "the diversions of Purley" (1990: 10), Ackroyd tries to get out of the modernist prison of language in a characteristically contradictory way that evinces the influence of Pound and Eliot. He affirms the constructedness of writing while simultaneously attempting to recover its mythopoeic and transcendental function. This attempt to recuperate the (unreal and fragmentary) texts of the past and to confer on them mythical unity as a way of conferring meaning on the present and of achieving self-identity is also the pivot around which Ackroyd's historiographic metafictions develop.

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[4] Cf. Onega, 1998, Ch. 1, on the evolution of Ackroyd's poetry.

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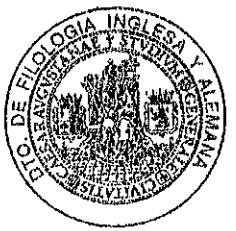

1: *The Great Fire of London* and *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde*

DURING HIS UNIVERSITY YEARS AT CAMBRIDGE, Ackroyd was so obsessed with poetry that, as he told an interviewer: "I don't think I even *read* a novel till I was 26 or 27" (McGrath, 1988/89: 45). Although in a later interview he admitted having written a thesis on James Baldwin, Richard Wright, and Ralph Ellison (Onega, 1996: 210), the fact remains that he was not seriously interested in fiction until 1973, when he became the youngest literary editor ever employed by the *Spectator*. He then started reading fiction with the same voracity that he had brought to poetry and literary theory at Cambridge and Yale. In 1978 he began writing *Dressing Up. Transvestism and Drag: The History of an Obsession* (1979) and was gathering material for his first biography, *Ezra Pound and his World* (1980). In keeping with his belief that all kinds of writing are simply the free play of language, Ackroyd sees his evolution from poetry to biography and fiction as complementary aspects of the same endeavor: "I do not see any great disjunction, or any great hiatus between the poetry and the fiction. For me they are part of the same process. Similarly the biographies. I don't think of biographies and fictions as being separate activities" (Onega, 1996: 212).

In *Dressing Up* Ackroyd investigates the origins, evolution, and diverse degrees of acceptance or rejection by different cultures of a recurrent phenomenon whose roots go back to the dawn of mankind and is traceable in widely divergent types of civilization. As the author points out in the acknowledgments, the book does not aspire to the category of scholarly or scientific work but is simply a well documented, fully illustrated survey of transvestism and drag that already shows, among other things, the young writer's interest in the comic possibilities cross-dressing offers the performing arts in general and pantomime in particular. As we will see, this topic will find more complex expression in his eighth novel, *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem* (1994), but all of Ackroyd's fiction may be said to reflect with greater or lesser intensity an interest in transvestism and drag as well as such popular art forms as vaudeville and pantomime, evinced, for example, in the construction of

grotesque and ludicrous gay or lesbian secondary characters or of heterosexual characters related to the world of music hall.

At the same time Ackroyd had been working on *Ezra Pound and His World* (1980). Like *Dressing Up*, this biography was published by Thames and Hudson and was likewise conceived as an introductory book aimed at the general reader. As in the earlier essay, the prose text visually functions as little more than extended footnotes to the 111 large, glossy illustrations. Although the text is, therefore, limited in extension and allows the author little space for elaborate argument, the effect is far from disappointing. As an early reviewer pointed out, "Ackroyd has ably fulfilled the requirements of the series . . . and produced a concise and well-proportioned account of Pound's life, with occasional literary judgments as an accompaniment to a marvellous series of photographs." More interestingly for our purposes, Ellis concludes: "Apart from displaying his competence as a biographer, Mr Ackroyd copes manfully with the task of writing intelligently on Pound's poetry, and in particular on the *Cantos*, in so short a space" (1981: 989). Indeed, throughout the short biography it is possible to appreciate Ackroyd's keen interest in the great modernist poet evident, for example, in his distaste for oversimplification when dealing with controversial issues, such as the darker side of Pound's ideology. Although he never tries to justify Pound's lapse into fascism, Ackroyd presents it as the result of the poet's increasing process of alienation and of his growing "demand for other ways of seeing the world" (71). However, Ackroyd's true interest in Pound is hardly related to his political ideas. This biography may be said to stem from the same creative impulse that had produced *Notes for a New Culture* and would also give birth to the prize-winning biography *T. S. Eliot* (1984). Ackroyd is interested in Pound as the literary figure on whose shoulders rests the responsibility for the creation of "the taste of an entire literary generation" (Ackroyd, 1980: 50). For Ackroyd the work that belligerent critical propagandist Pound had carried out on behalf of Eliot, Joyce, and Wyndham Lewis "was heroic, . . . if it had not been for his efforts, the work of Eliot and Joyce might well have remained obscure or little known" (50). As he points out, Pound's dedication to the work of his friends often resulted in the neglect of his own. However, this dedication was not totally unselfish, for Pound well knew that creativity cannot feed on itself, that — as his translated versions of earlier poems make clear — the great modernist "often elicits great poetry from the manipulation of another's voice" (53). In other words, what fascinates the young biographer is the way Pound managed to express his "restless and shifting identity" by translating, reshaping, and manipulating the voices of the past masters into what can be described as an intertextual palimpsest of accumulated echoes, capable of suggesting a self-sustained world of language, precisely the same effect that Ackroyd tries to achieve in his own fiction.

In *Ezra Pound and his World*, Ackroyd notes how, although Pound had been praising *Ulysses* for several years, by the summer of 1923, when he had finished the revision of the opening *Cantos*, he changed his mind and thought that Joyce's novel signalled the end of a period to be followed by the beginning of "the Pound Era" (65). Pound's contention that *Ulysses* signalled the end of a period and that *Finnegans Wake* was a dead end, while his own *Cantos* were the beginning of a new era should be read in the context of *Notes for a New Culture* in which Ackroyd singles out as the most important difference between humanism and modernism the realization by the latter that reason cannot function without the mediation of language, that there is no way in which the human mind can reach truth in unmediated form. This contention, which in the hands of Jacques Derrida and Paul de Man was to become the basic tenet of deconstructionism, levels literature, history, even philosophy — the most purely abstract kind of thought — to the same category of linguistic manifestations sharing their irreducible condition of *writing*. From this perspective we could say that *Finnegans Wake* was a logically consistent and extreme example of writing as free play, the prose equivalent of language poetry taken to its ultimate consequences. But, as Ackroyd acutely felt, the same force that liberates language from its utilitarian function also opens an unbridgeable gulf between self and world: the realization that there is an irreducible gap between signifier and signified also means that the only accessible reality is the inner reality of self-perception. This is why Pound disliked *Finnegans Wake* so intensely. It is also why Ackroyd is fascinated with the *Cantos*, for they constitute Pound's most articulate attempt to find a way out of the modernist prison of language.

What interests Ackroyd is the way in which Pound, in *A Draft of XXX Cantos*, presents the poet as wandering Odysseus, a mythical quester traveling across time zones and ontological boundaries in order to "shock the readers . . . into an awareness of the disturbed and complex world around them" (75). Pound's method to suggest the existence of a disturbed and complex outward ontology is carried out through juxtapositions: of the general with the particular, of all kinds of voices, genres, and modes, and of history, autobiography, and literature. Through juxtaposition, Pound reveals repeated patterns in history and the existence of moments when the world of linear time is trans-

formed by the cyclical world of myth and the eternal time of the gods. In other words, although the *Cantos* were left unfinished and are made up of fragmented extracts demanding the reader's collaboration to complete them, Pound was convinced that they contained "all the knowledge worth knowing, all the works of literature worth reading" (Ellis, 1981: 989), thus gesturing to a mysterious unity-within-fragmentation effect, which brings to mind Pound's allegiance with the American tradition of Transcendentalism, handed down through Emerson and Agassiz.

As Emerson explains in "Spiritual Laws," one of the basic tenets of Transcendentalism is the belief in the existence of a design or unity in nature, "a soul at the centre of nature, and over the will of man, so that none of us can wrong the universe" (Daiches, Bradbury, and Mottram, eds., 1981: 86). As Ackroyd explains in *T. S. Eliot*, the poetry of T. S. Eliot — and, we can add, Peter Ackroyd's poetry and fiction as well — is likewise informed by the need to find the underlying pattern holding together the fragmentary and subjective perceptions of the thinking individual.

In the biography of T. S. Eliot, Ackroyd explains how Pound and Eliot shared an acute feeling of alienation from American culture and society, evident, for example, in Eliot's definition of himself on several occasions as a "resilient alien" and the fact that "Ezra Pound used much the same terms to describe his own position in the United States" (Ackroyd, 1989: 24). For Ackroyd, the reason why they felt estranged not simply from "one community or another [but] from the country itself" has to do with the fact that they "grew up in a time of great ethical and social confusion" (24) that produced in them "a terrible emptiness" and the need to seek "a tradition or order of their own," which they had to create for themselves, "going to sources as remote as Platonism, Buddhism or medieval literature" (25).

Eliot's need to find "some centre, some kind of coherence or wholeness" (25) surely is what lies at the heart of Pound's baffling unity-within-fragmentation effect in the *Cantos*. According to Ackroyd, it is also what explains Eliot's early fascination with the philosophical ideas of F. H. Bradley, on which he wrote his doctoral thesis. Convinced of the relativity and subjectivity of meaning and of the impossibility of discovering any objective meaning even in the most significant patterns of human behavior, Eliot, like Pound, seeks a way out of pure subjectivity and the failure of communication it involves by embracing Bradley's definition of reality: "For Bradley 'Reality is One', a seamless and coherent whole which is non-relational — that is, it cannot be divided into separate intellectual categories" (49). Interestingly, as Ackroyd further explains, in his subversion of such orthodox categories as space and time, which reflect only a partial comprehension of reality, "Bradley is pushed back towards a larger description which can only be expressed as the Absolute. Without such a concept, the world becomes literally meaningless. The Absolute holds together Thought and Reality, Will and Feeling, in a sublime whole" (49).[1]

Bradley's contention that reality is One and that there is an Absolute truth in the realm of the sublime, beyond the limitations of conceptual knowledge, brings to mind Emerson's pantheistic idealism. However, in Bradley's scheme idealism is combined with the kind of skepticism that was so dear to Eliot, the recognition that all forms of knowledge and experience are conditional or relative, and that it is only when "they are organized into a coherent whole [that] they can vouchsafe glimpses of absolute truth" (50). Ackroyd points out, in words that recall his own magpie acquisitiveness and help explain the structural neatness of his novels, that "the only way of reaching towards the Absolute is by a steady enlargement of our knowledge and a continual search for system, unity and coherence" (50).

In the opening pages of the Eliot biography, Ackroyd, describing the pervasive and dominant presence of Eliot's grandfather William Greenleaf Eliot over the Eliot household and the influence he exerted on T. S. Eliot in particular, cannot resist the temptation to adopt Eliot's own voice, recasting his line "Webster was much possessed by death," from "Whispers of Immortality" (Eliot, 1974: 55), in a pastiche: "Eliot was much possessed by the dead" (Ackroyd, 1989: 16), which suggests a similar capacity for stylistic imitation in the biographer. A little later Ackroyd describes T. S. Eliot's capacity to absorb the styles and voices of the poets of the past as "a sort of 'demonic possession'" (27), and he explains how Eliot was able throughout his life to adopt or parody the mannerisms of other writers in verse pastiche, in fake letters, in the composition of publishers' "blurbs," as well as in his prose writing (27–28).

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[1] Ackroyd summarizes the main tenets of Bradley's thought: "We live in a world of 'appearances' which partake of the Absolute without fully containing or representing it. And yet this Absolute can only be approached from the perspective of a number of 'finite centres' — not quite the same as the 'self' or the 'soul' but equivalent to them. And although 'finite truth must be conditional' it is only through such experience and through 'appearances' that we can begin to have any knowledge of the Absolute" (1989: 49).

In *The Anxiety of Influence* Harold Bloom contends that poetic history "is undistinguishable from poetic influence, since strong poets make that history by misreading one another, so as to clear imaginative space for themselves" (1975: 5). Although Ackroyd has said that his interest in the writers of the past had nothing to do with any kind of pressure, that he "didn't feel what Bloom calls 'anxiety of influence,' nothing of that kind at all" (Onega, 1996: 212), the fact is that his poetry is built on the accumulation of the voices and styles of earlier "strong poets" such as Ashbery, Auden, Pound, Yeats, and Eliot and the novels of writers such as Oscar Wilde, Chatterton, Dickens, and Milton, whose influence Ackroyd has acknowledged (Onega, 1996: 214). What is more, the idea of absorption and recasting of the combined voices of the English cultural tradition is discussed at length in *Notes for a New Culture*, recurs in virtually every novel, and provides the subject matter of *Chatterton* (1987) and *English Music* (1992). Indeed, Ackroyd has gone so far as to admit that the capacity for absorbing the styles and voices of the past has always been part of his creative imagination. As a postgraduate student at Yale he wrote a play in which he tried to absorb and recast the styles of about sixty different playwrights: "I used a different line from each poet and structured a play out of that. So I presume that interest in lifting or adopting various styles, various traces, various languages is part of my imaginative trend." (Onega, 1996: 213).

Referring to the activity of biography writing, Ackroyd has said that "the most important thing about any biography is the biographer" (Haffenden, 1996: 14). These words, together with his insistence that the poetry, the novels, and the biographies are part of the same process, may be interpreted as evidence of his conviction that biographies are just an alternative way of tackling the biographer's obsessions. Reading his poetry in chronological order, it is easy to see how Ackroyd evinces a growing impatience with the astringencies of poststructuralist and deconstructive theory and how he attempts to go beyond the modernist "inward turn" in late poems such as "the diversions of Purley" by having recourse to the mythopoeic and transcendental function of writing. Therefore, the biographies of Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot, written earlier than these poems, may be said to respond to Ackroyd's own need to analyze the ways in which the two great modernist poets had approached and tried to solve the same question. As we have seen, Pound's and Eliot's ways out of the prison of language involved the recovery of the fragmentary perceptions of the history, literature, and culture of the past and their organization into an overall pattern that

would reveal glimpses of a transcendental, sublime Truth. That is, it involved, in Ackroyd's words, "striving towards the Absolute by a steady enlargement of our knowledge and a continual search for system, unity and coherence." As Ackroyd points out in the Eliot biography, the problem with this scheme is that it is based on an act of faith, the postulation of the existence of an Absolute Logos, an objective world in which, in F. H. Bradley's words, "the cruder and vaguer, or more limited, is somehow contained and explained in the wider and precise" (Ackroyd, 1989: 70).

In the novels, Ackroyd attempts to transcend the modernist "inward turn" along the lines set by Pound and Eliot, that is, by postulating the transcendental component of writing. However, unlike the high modernists, he will find it extremely difficult to make the crucial act of faith, to pledge his trust in the existence of an absolute and transcendental ideal world outside or beyond the textual world itself, so that, in keeping with the contradictory nature of postmodernism, his novels characteristically hesitate between pattern and randomness, unity and fragmentation, paradoxically managing to affirm and deny simultaneously the possibility of transcendence.

Ackroyd's first published novel, *The Great Fire of London* (1982), was received by the critics as an interesting development in the career of the poet and already well-known "incisive and abrasive reviewer" (King, 1982: 20). *The Great Fire of London* is the first of a series of fiction and nonfiction books prompted by Ackroyd's admiration for Dickens, whom we can describe in Bloomian terms as one of Ackroyd's strongest predecessors. For those wondering about the compatibility of Ackroyd's admiration for the modernist poets and the Victorian novelist, suffice it to recall that Eliot took the original title of *The Waste Land*, "He Do the Police in Different Voices" from Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend* (Ackroyd, 1990: 427).

The Great Fire of London opens with a prefatory chapter entitled "the story so far" (1984a: 3), comparable to the "Author's Preface" of realist fiction. An external author-narrator summarizes the first part of Charles Dickens's *Little Dorrit* and concludes with the puzzling remark: "Although it could not be described as a true story, certain events have certain consequences." (3). The words can be interpreted simply as a warning that Dickens's writing of *Little Dorrit* was not a self-contained act, that, once created, the novel will condition the work of successive generations of writers. This is indeed the basic idea around which the main plot of the novel develops: a film maker, Spenser Spender, becomes increasingly obsessed with the project of making a

film version of *Little Dorrit* that will be based on a script written by a Canadian academic teaching at Cambridge, Rowan Phillips. But the "consequences" of unearthing and appropriating *Little Dorrit* in order to recreate it go beyond the technical bounds of intertextual indebtedness and affect the lives of the people involved in the project in very awkward ways.

The novel follows the characteristic multiplot structure of Victorian fiction. In the first four chapters of Part One, an external narrator introduces in succession different main characters: Little Arthur, Audrey Skelton, Spenser Spender, and Rowan Phillips. The ensuing chapters progressively develop the complex net of relationships that knit together the lives of these characters to each other and to innumerable other characters, whose paths meet either because they are "intellectually" interested in Dickens, like Spenser and Phillips, or because they live in the area where the plot of *Little Dorrit* was set, like Little Arthur and Audrey Skelton. Eventually, a panoramic view of London is built out of the fragments of the lives of the whole community that casts significant light on the condition of contemporary man.

In Dickensian fashion, many of the secondary characters have names that point to their condition as types: the innocent working-class youth, Timothy Coleman; the left-wing teacher of Victorian social history, Job Penstone; the flamboyant Sir Frederick Lustlambert, director of the Film Finance Board. Likewise, the personalities of the characters are often suggested by means of well-known Dickensian mechanisms. For example, minor secondary characters are masterfully characterized in a few brush strokes that underline some outstanding physical trait or peculiarity: "A young man with extremely long hair and a small beard, seemed to walk in sideways like a crab, keeping his eyes upon the carpet" (39). Or again: "a middle-aged couple who looked, and sounded, as if they were on a coach-outing to see a new play" (39). Another example would be Andrew Christopher, the lover of Spenser Spender's wife, Laetitia, whose self-infatuation and hypocrisy are suggested by his gleaming eyes and the awkward contrast between his beard and lips: "Andrew Christopher was tall, with a beard that seemed to reveal rather than conceal his lips, and eyes that gleamed as if a match had been struck behind them" (47). Another, more prominent character who is strictly built along Dickensian lines is Sir Frederick Lustlambert, described in a style that amounts to pure Dickensian pastiche:

> a "distinguished" man, who, like the building in which he was immured, took care that he looked so and that everybody knew so. His grey hair was curled into neat waves; his suit was of grey silk; his face was grey also, as if it had been conceived and grown in a committee room. His distinction was only marred by the suspicion of a hooked nose which, in profile, made him resemble Punch (51).

In this description, the narrator makes Sir Frederick and the office building of the Film Financial Board share the same traits of "distinction" ironically characterized as grey: grey building, grey face, grey wavy hair, and grey silk suit all combine to give an image of dullness, propriety, and wealth, simultaneously undermined, however, by the suggestion of crookedness and buffoonery implicit in the Punch-like hooked nose. In keeping with Dickens's technique of expressing the personality of a given character through one prominent physical trait, Sir Stephen's hooked nose is personalized and metonymically substituted for the distinguished director: "The profile of Punch turned towards the window, and the nose savoured the aroma of the words before they fell out into the winter air" (52); "the nose sniffed at the phrase" (53).

Sir Frederick believes himself to be a powerful man, with many areas of influence. Therefore, his discourse is dotted by pet sentences or phrases such as: "I am forced to wear my government hat" (52); "I have to wear my civil service hat" (53); "I wear my chairman's hat" (53); "I am wearing my film man's hat" (152); "In my bureaucratic hat" (152). The constant repetition of these pet sayings, with their intertextual echoes of Wemmick's "official" and "unofficial" selves in *Great Expectations* — and of Stephen Dedalus's parody of Wemmick, with his "Hamlet hat" and his "cockle hat" in the "Proteus" chapter of *Ulysses*, or of Vladimir and Estragon's funny exchange of Lucky's hat in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* — adds a farcical dimension to the character, who becomes a talking parrot with a hooked nose; while listening to him, "Spenser was about to be thrilled, thankful, but he was not quite sure what had been said to him" (52).

In other cases, Ackroyd uses names in order to suggest their condition as transhistorical or "reincarnated" characters. Spenser Spender's name, for example, functions as an onomastic palimpsest of accumulated echoes, simultaneously evoking the poet Stephen Spender (1909–1995);[2] the founder of evolutionist philosophy, Herbert Spencer

[2] Stephen Spender was educated at University College, Oxford, where he became friendly with Auden, MacNeice, and Isherwood. He is the author of the notorious "The Pylons," the poem that gave the nickname of "Pylon poets" to himself and his friends. He also published a critical work, *The Destruc-*

(1820–1903); and the Renaissance poet Edmund Spenser (ca. 1552–1599). As a film maker, he is the representative of the late twentieth-century creative artist; but he is also the epigone of a long line of strong predecessors that goes back to the Renaissance or, if we prefer, he is their twentieth-century reincarnation.

Another example of onomastic palimpsest is Little Arthur, whose name simultaneously evokes two Dickensian characters: Amy Dorrit and Arthur Clennam. Amy was called "Little Dorrit" because of her diminutive stature, like that of Little Arthur, who "had stopped growing when he was eight" (5).[3] Dickens's hero, Arthur Clennam, eventually falls in love with the pure and innocent Amy, while his namesake, Little Arthur, murders "his only love" (44), a beautiful eight-year-old girl, as a way of preserving her innocence (42). After murdering the child, Little Arthur is sent to the Marshalsea Prison, where Little Dorrit had been born and lived with her father. There he develops a friendship with Pally, whom Spenser Spender has known "for fifteen or sixteen years the first years of their lives" (12).

Pally is another example of derivative reincarnation in his case of Amy Dorrit's friend, Maggie. Like her, Pally is a half-wit with a drooping mouth, but, unlike Maggie, he is also a dangerous paranoic, who hears voices and has apocalyptic visions (57). Although Pally cannot articulate the reason why he detests Spender, he hears an inner voice telling him that "that one means trouble" (57). The difference in moral quality between Little Arthur and Pally, on the one hand, and Amy Dorrit, Arthur Clennam, and Maggie, on the other, is good proof that the twentieth-century characters are morally devalued versions of their ancestors, living in a darker, chaotic historical period.

But the most complex example of a transhistorical or reincarnated character is Audrey Skelton, a quiet girl with a great capacity to fantasize, whom Rowan Phillips believes to be schizophrenic because she is constantly day-dreaming and has memories from the past, such as the one in which she "remembers" the fire of the Marshalsea Prison: "She

tive Element (1935), largely on James, Eliot and Yeats and their different responses to a civilization in decline. It ends with a section called "In Defence of a Political Subject," in which he discusses the work of Auden and Upward and argues the importance of treating "politico-moral" subjects in literature. That is, Stephen Spender represents the type of utilitarian or "humanist" poetry Ackroyd despises, a fact which adds an ironic touch to Spenser Spender's characterization.

[3] Little Arthur also brings to mind Günter Grass's Oskar in *The Tin Drum*.

dreamed that she was inside the old prison, except that it was lit up by rows of brilliant light" (10). Audrey has a crucial experience the day she attends a seance near Ealing Common and is invaded by the spirit of Little Dorrit. Afterwards, Amy Dorrit starts speaking through her. Audrey, believing herself to be the Victorian heroine, decides to stop the filming of the novel on the grounds that the actress playing her part was completely out of character and that the whole project was wrong.

The telephone operator's Christian name, "Audrey," shares with "Amy" a capital "A" and a relative phonetic similarity, but "Skelton" rather brings to mind the Renaissance poet John Skelton and his Skeltonic verse, which curiously matches Audrey's great difficulty to express her ideas fluently.[4] In this sense, the fact that Skelton's *Collyn Cloute* influenced Edmund Spenser may be read as an elaborate hint that, for all their obvious differences in social class and education, the roots of their culture go back to the same source.

The same idea is reinforced and ironized by another of the main characters, the script writer Rowan Phillips, whose name echoes that of the late fifteenth-century Vicar of Croydon, the Rev. Rowland Phillips, who for all his well-known orthodox opinions and his devotion to Catholicism, eventually yielded to Henry VIII's pressure and swore to the oath of succession (1534) that cost Sir Thomas More his life (Ackroyd, 1998: 352). Phillips is a Cambridge-based Canadian academic and novelist with a passion for Dickens who may be described as a parodic version of Peter Ackroyd: he leads a double life as prestigious honorary professor in Cambridge and as libertine homosexual in London, and he likes mixing biography, history, and fiction: "He had published a novel which, begun as 'literary' fiction, had ended as a thriller . . . a short biography of Wilkie Collins and now was involved in a critical study of Charles Dickens — a study, his publisher had told him, 'for the 1980s'" (Ackroyd, 1984a: 19). Phillips starts an affair with Tim Coleman, a working-class youth who at first is physically indifferent, while Phillips is attracted and dependent. However, in keeping with his egotism and lack of candor or tenderness, Phillips is soon bored with Tim and with ill grace abandons the now-dependent and disoriented youth.

Rowan Phillips's incapacity to love is similar to that of Spenser Spender and of other educated characters in the novel. Spender is the alienated grown-up with a Dickensian past of affective deprivation,

[4] In *Collyn Cloute*, 53–58: "For though my ryme be ragged,/ Tattered and jagged,/ Rudely rayne-beaten,/ Rusty and mothe-eaten,/ Yf ye take well therwith,/ It hath in it some pyth" (Drabble, ed., 1980: 910).

who, in contrast to Oliver Twist, David Copperfield, or Little Dorrit, is utterly self-indulgent and egotistic. When his neglected wife leaves him, Spender is reminded of his abandonment by his mother and querulously associates both episodes: "Letty had left him — *him*, a person called Spenser Spender — his baby had gone from him. He was the baby and his parent had left him" (95).

Spenser Spender suffers from the egotism and fragmentation of the self characteristic of the postmodernist hero. His relationship with his wife Laetitia is meaningless. He has degraded her from Laetitia ("happiness") to "Lettuce," and they lead equally self-centered and self-indulgent lives that will induce her to start an alienating affair with Andrew Christopher, which in turn leads to her catching a venereal disease from the unscrupulous and careless lover and attempting suicide, from which she recovers only to realize that "Sometimes I just feel dead inside" (140) and that "there was no other place for her to go; no other place" (141). Characteristically, for Spender, the survival of his wife simply means the possibility of renewing the same old pattern of alienation in this true waste land of aimless and spiritually barren descendants of Eliot's "hollow men," rather than the pattern modelled by Dickens's deeply humane heroes. After Laetitia's recovery, Spender dismisses the whole dramatic episode on the reflection that everything was back where it should be and that he could "continue the filming with a clear conscience, all conflicts resolved . . . he knew that he would never mention it to her again. They would wipe out the past" (141).

Spender's belief that he can go on filming *Little Dorrit* with a clear conscience and simultaneously "wipe out the past" shows how unfit he is to understand Dickens, even though he wants to carry out the project precisely because he believes that "Dickens understood London" (16), and he is aware that the film might help him solve some kind of mystery connecting London to his own life: "He had come back because it was in this area that he had been born, that he had 'grown up'. He wanted to find a key to the mystery, although he did not know what the mystery was" (11). The filmmaker is fascinated with the ancient city, and he feels its weird power over him without actually being able to account for it. He is aware of the Roman origins of the millenarian city and has the feeling that "There's something strange about London, . . . some kind of magic or something. Did you know if you drew a line between all of Hawksmoor's churches, they would form a pentangle? Isn't that weird?" (16).

The idea the drunken filmmaker is trying to transmit to his bored wife is that London has a transhistorical mystical or magical side whose

spirit Dickens succeeded in capturing. But his reference to the Hawksmoor churches simultaneously anticipates the subject matter of Ackroyd's third novel, *Hawksmoor* (1985). The link with this novel is further enhanced by the reader's spontaneous assumption that *The Great Fire of London* refers to the fire of 1666 that destroyed the churches in London and Westminster, later to be rebuilt by architect Nicholas Hawksmoor. But, why should a sequel to *Little Dorrit* have a title that refers to an event that took place in the seventeenth century rather than in the nineteenth? The logical answer to this question is that the Great Fire of the title refers to the fire that takes place at the end of the novel in the twentieth century. Still, for all its logical implausibility, the reader cannot suppress the deeply inbuilt association of the phrase "The Great Fire of London" with the fire of 1666, and neither can he or she forget the obvious parallelisms between *The Great Fire of London* and *Hawksmoor*. Therefore, a more satisfactory answer would have to include the abolition of the notion of historical or linear time in favor of the cyclical time of myth. As Mircea Eliade explains in *The Myth of the Eternal Return* (1989), history is a recent discovery in the life of humanity and archaic humanity defended itself, to the utmost of its powers, against all the novelty and irreversibility that history entails with the belief that the creation of the world is reproduced every year. The eternal repetition of the cosmogonic act, by transforming every New Year into the inauguration of an era, permits the return of the dead to life and maintains the hope of the faithful in the resurrection of the body, while the end of the year amounts to a veritable end of the world (Eliade, 1989: 62).

In *A Vision* (1966), W. B. Yeats, drawing on a variety of sources that run from diverse Eastern religions, Heraclitus, and Plato to Vico, Blake, and Nietzsche, develops his own cyclical view of history and of man's incarnation as a microcosm. According to Yeats, history moves in two-thousand-year cycles. The growth, maturity, and decline of a civilization is divided into twenty-eight phases: the twenty-eight phases of the lunar month, with the zenith or maturity at the full moon of phase fifteen. For Yeats, history and the reincarnations of the soul equally develop in conical spirals or "gyres," that follow the Heraclitean principle of conflict of opposites: subjective/objective; natural/supernatural; love/hate; war/peace; physical/spiritual; etc. Yeats believed that the birth of Christ signalled the beginning of a historical cycle of two thousand years. Accordingly, Western civilization would have already left behind the positive phases of growth and maturity and would be mov-

ing through the darkest phases of decline towards utter chaos and extinction, heralded by the "second coming" of the antichrist.

In the light of Eliade and Yeats, it is easy to see that the Great Fire of London that breaks out at the beginning of *Hawksmoor* is an apocalyptic fire signalling the beginning of a phase of chaos. Equally apocalyptic are the Great Fire which breaks out at the end of *The Great Fire of London* and the fire which, according to the blue metal notice Spenser Spender finds fixed upon the wall of the Marshalsea Prison, destroyed it "on December 14 1885" (Ackroyd, 1984a: 25), a date that is, according to the narrator, just about the time when Dickens started writing the novel: "between 1855 and 1857" (3). From a mythical perspective, the Great Fire of 1666, the Marshalsea fire of 1885, and the Great Fire with which the novel ends are all reenactments of the same apocalyptic fire, signalling the transition from one historical cycle to the next, each closing a darker and darker phase of decline, in the inexorable spiral movement toward the final stage of chaos and extinction of the Western civilization that will be reached at the end of the year 2000.

From this mythical perspective, the metaphorical reincarnation of the characters becomes as real as their possibility of transcendence to a higher level of being. Throughout *The Great Fire of London* there is abundant evidence that Spenser Spender and the other characters in the novel are living in a dark period of chaos, and moving towards an apocalyptic end. The characters themselves, as we have seen, evince clear symptoms of alienation and self-fragmentation. They also feel an acute purposelessness and loss of direction. For example, Spenser Spender, sitting in a bus, suddenly "realised that he was travelling in the wrong direction. He got off the bus in panic, and tried to find his way home" (140). Laetitia, likewise, "found herself attracted to tall, dark streets where the new season had for some reason been refused entry . . . and wandered without direction or purpose" (116). The dark lanes and squares are dumb witnesses of constant acts of degradation and crimes. During one of his nocturnal flings, the drunken Rowan Phillips "walked over and pretended to read a poster concerning a series of murders in that vicinity" (74). What is more, warnings about the impending outbreak of the Great Fire occur from beginning to end of the novel. For example, when Laetitia Spender switches on the television, she finds that "three fire engines were to be seen hurtling over Tower Bridge" (13), and the sirens of the lurching fire engines ululate through London at all times and invade the privacy of sitting rooms

and bedrooms with their piercing noise, providing an ever-present, ominous background to the characters' actions.

As the plot develops, the more intuitive characters progressively realize that they are only the latest generation living in an area of London that has been inhabited for thousands of years in an unbroken chain of successive generations of men and women whose traces are still recognizable on the faces of the people as well as in the alleys, the squares, and the buildings frequented by them. Some dimly intuit that they are somehow connected to the past of the city and that a better understanding of the history of London would help them come to terms with themselves. One of them is Audrey Skelton, who shows her perception of this fact when she tells her boyfriend, Tim Coleman: "History is interesting when you live in the area, isn't it?" (9).

Characters involved in the film project, such as Rowan Phillips, Job Penstone, and Sir Frederick Lustlambert, are interested in Dickens as a means of recovering London's history, but, as Spender is surprised to discover, their approaches to *Little Dorrit* are puzzlingly divergent and incompatible with his own interpretation: "each time a new interpretation of *Little Dorrit* was sprung upon him, it subtly devalued his own and it took a conscious effort of will for him to reassert it" (85). Sir Frederick's interest in the project is politically and economically biased: he wants to cut out the prison sequences to save money and ingratiate the trade unions (151); Job Penstone and his group of radical left-wing students complain about Dickens's anti-feminism (83) and want to turn the film into a documentary on the condition of the poor and the defence of socialist ideals (80–84). In contrast, Rowan Phillips exclusively sees "*Little Dorrit* in terms of its symbolic structure, the ambiguity of its images" (88), while Spender hopes to recover the lost key to his childhood through Dickens. As the actual filming begins, Little Arthur, Pally, and Audrey Skelton that is, the characters who appear to be the reincarnation of the Victorian protagonists become more and more suspicious and reckless. Equally suspicious and reckless become the numberless outcasts that crowd the prison and the streets of London, those outcasts whose faces Laetitia anxiously scrutinizes "for signs of an unhappiness similar to her own": "the workman with his flat cap, grinning to himself . . . the old woman, curved over like a plant . . . the young boy, pale, ragged." (134). Laetitia watches them pass by and reflects on how they have lost all traces of individuality in order to become just types, definable through their relationship to London: "they represented this city, they existed in no other place. The strength and the darkness of London had compressed itself into these tiny wandering

forms. She could have drowned in it, she thought, like the old woman with the prams" (134–35)

Laetitia has seen this old woman on several occasions. The first time, Laetitia wonders about "the speed with which she too, could join the old woman on the streets of the city" (15). The old woman is one of the many tramps who crisscross the streets of London at all times, who crowd the area by the river where the exterior shots of *Little Dorrit* are being filmed, and who gather around the underground station near the Marshalsea Prison. These beggars, moving about in swarms like the flies with which they are often associated are, like the sirens of the fire brigades, an ominous warning of the chaotic phase the city is undergoing. When Rowan Phillips visits the Marshalsea Prison for inspiration, he notices a young tramp, sitting by the entrance to Borough Tube Station and, a little further ahead, other tramps looking "on with impersonal curiosity" (22). Significantly, it is the visionary Audrey who associates the presence of beggars with the recurrence of suffering in specific areas of London:

> "There has been so much suffering and distress around here . . . . It can't really be all that different now from what it was then, can it? All those young boys begging down by the station — wasn't that a Victorian thing, too, all that? Begging and all?" Audrey had worked herself into an agony of words, and stood up. The fly was buzzing around her now, seeming to swoop on her. (33)

The fire, the tramps, and the buzzing flies are Ackroyd's emblems of the cyclical and evil nature of creation, which, according to mythical thought, brought about man's "fall" into history. Tramps and flies are creatures that multiply in periods of crisis and, as Audrey Skelton suggests in the above quotation, survive the passage from one cosmogonic cycle to the next in certain areas of the ancient city. The three elements: the apocalyptic fire, the flies that symbolize the evil nature of the creation through their association with Satan (The Lord of the Flies), and the tramps, who represent the final stage of degradation and self-alienation toward which Laetitia and the other Londoners inexorably move, will reappear in *Hawksmoor*. The convicts, the tramps, and the contemporary reincarnations of Dickens's characters are the ones who intuit more clearly the cyclical and evil nature of human existence. Their conviction that they must put an end to the filming of *Little Dorrit* has to do with this perception and with the belief that the film is hopelessly misreading the real spirit of London. As soon as Audrey makes up her mind to burn down the stage by the river where the exteriors are being filmed, she notices "the tramps who generally loitered around the tube station" and realizes that "their plight was very similar to hers" (161). Two of them are young men with red hair — curiously like the tramp nicknamed "The Architect" in *Hawksmoor*. Audrey addresses one of them and they enthusiastically agree to help her set fire to the stage (162).

Spenser Spender and Audrey Skelton are caught in the fire in a scene that echoes the death by fire of Miss Havisham in *Great Expectations*. Spenser dies because Rowan Phillips is too cowardly to rescue him: "If he moved quickly, he might be able to pull Spenser from beneath the awning. But he was afraid for his life" (164). Audrey is saved, however, because Tim risks his life for hers, although he knows that she doesn't want to be saved, that "she would stay by her creation" (164). As the narrator explains, the flames "burnt for a day and a night. It seemed to Tim that they might burn for ever, taking the whole of London with them" (165). In keeping with its apocalyptic character, what came to be known as the Great Fire

> destroyed much that was false and ugly, and much that was splendid or beautiful. Some longed for it to burn everything, but for others a new and disquieting sense of impermanence entered their lives. Eventually, legends were to grow around it. It was popularly believed to have been a visitation, a prophecy of yet more terrible things to come. (165)

Simultaneously with this Great Fire, Little Arthur succeeds in provoking a general collapse of the electrical system in the Marshalsea Prison, using his own body to make the connection between the cables that the film technicians had left behind. As the current surges through the cables and through the body of Little Arthur the lights go out, the cells open, the surveillance cameras shut down, and the main gates and walls yield to the pressure exerted by the roaring inmates as they rush out toward freedom (168–69) in a scene that parodies Amy's and her father's release "from the Marshalsea with much celebration" (3).

In keeping with the dual logic of myth, the effect of the Great Fire and of the opening up of the prison is double: for the Marshalsea inmates, the tramps, Audrey, Little Arthur, and Pally that is, for the outcasts and working-class visionary Londoners with a mythical conception of life (the equivalent of the "folk" in Thomas Hardy's terms) it is a joyful event, signifying the possibility of a new start in life, of some form of regeneration. However, for socially integrated and rationally educated middle-class people (Hardy's "individuals") the fire produces

a new and disquieting sense of impermanence. The different reactions synthesize what Ackroyd considers to be two basic kinds of human beings: the visionaries and the rationalists, those who have an innate sense of transcendence and those who lack it. As we have seen, those who fail to perceive the transcendental nature of human life are angst-ridden, alienated, and doomed to extinction, but visionaries do not fare much better because for them the endless cycles of reincarnation are a punishment from which they are desperately seeking to escape.

In the prefatory chapter the external author-narrator points out: "Although this could not be described as a true story, certain events have certain consequences" (3). In the last paragraph of the novel, we find a slightly different version of the same sentence: "This is not a true story, but certain things follow from other things" (168). The repetition of the fires of 1666 and of 1885 in the Great Fire at the end of the novel conveys the circularity and closure at the level of story or discourse. The repetition of a similar sentence at the beginning and at the end of the novel has the same effect at the narrative level. This suggested narrative circularity is in keeping with mythical reading and also with the traditional closure of realistic fiction. However, the narrator's insistence that "This is not a true story" works in the opposite direction, stirring a teasing doubt the realism-biased reader has been trying to suppress, namely, the question of the ontological status of the reincarnated or transhistorical characters. Up to the moment when the spirit of Little Dorrit enters the body of Audrey Skelton, the reader instinctively assumes an ontological difference between the "real" world in which Audrey Skelton and Spenser Spender move and the "fictional" world of the characters in *Little Dorrit*, one reason being precisely the fact that Spender and the other "real" characters at the same narrative level are involved, in one way or another, in the production of an "unreal" film version of the novel. Within a realistic logic, the transmigration of the soul of Little Dorrit to the body of Audrey Skelton would constitute a metalepsis in Gerard Genette's sense of the word (1972: 243–46), that is, a trespassing on narrative levels that works as a major frame break, shattering to its foundations the willing suspension of disbelief of the reader.

The transmigration of Little Dorrit's spirit can only take place if we accept either the fictionality of the visionary telephone operator, or the reality of the Dickensian character. The same ontological incongruence (a metalepsis, or trespassing of narrative levels, in narratological terms) lies behind the assumption that Audrey Skelton might be a reincarnation of a real Renaissance poet, Spenser Spender of various real writers

and thinkers, or Rowan Phillips of the notorious recanter, the Rev. Rowland Phillips. Therefore, the only possibility would be to accept the fact that, in the world of *The Great Fire of London*, the boundaries between fiction and reality are non-existent, that the difference between fictional characters and real people; between real and fictional Great Fires, and between real and fictional worlds simply does not hold.

This interpretation undermines the mythical reading and confers a baffling *regressus in infinitum* structure to *The Great Fire of London* that enhances its condition of writing: Peter Ackroyd writes a sequel to *Little Dorrit* in which Rowan Phillips writes a script of *Little Dorrit*, for Spenser Spender's film version of *Little Dorrit*, to which Job Penstone and Sir Frederick Lustlambert would like to contribute their own versions of *Little Dorrit*, all of which are equally subjective and distorting misreadings of the original novel. Thus, *The Great Fire of London* reveals its condition of autonomous and self-begetting linguistic universe, endlessly yielding different versions of itself and constantly begetting derivative characters and derivative authors alike.

As the novel reveals its textuality, the liberation of the reincarnated Dickensian characters loses its transcendental dimension and becomes the futile rebellion of unfree fictional characters against their godlike creator: they succeed in burning their way out of the cardboard prison of Spenser Spender's film version of their world only to find themselves trapped within the walls of Peter Ackroyd's textual world. In this light, Phillips's refusal to risk his life for that of Spenser Spender can be interpreted as an extreme example of the control of the god-like Author and of his vengeful nature, condemning Spender to die for having tried to film a version of *Little Dorrit* that does not meet the requirements of his own version. But the joke is double-edged, for also imprisoned within the cardboard walls of the novel and incapable of conceiving his own transcendental escape is the god-like Author himself, whose fictionality is suggested by the identification of Ackroyd with Phillips and the fact that his own version of *Little Dorrit* is an equally distorting and subjective misreading of the original text.

Analyzing the biography of T. S. Eliot, Ackroyd points out, how F. H. Bradley's definition of reality involved the postulation of the existence of an Absolute Logos that would reconcile all opposites and would reveal glimpses of a transcendental, sublime Truth. Consequently, in *The Great Fire of London*, Ackroyd builds his own version of contemporary London on the accumulation of fragments of the styles, voices, and echoes of his strong predecessors, Dickens and Eliot, postulating as an overall unifying metaphor a transcendental or mythical

vision of the millenarian city. He presents London as the cultural palimpsest gathering together the wisdom of the English race at large and suggests that the recovery of this lost wisdom is the necessary prerequisite for a true understanding of the plight of contemporary man. Incapable, however, of making the crucial act of faith in an Absolute Logos, Ackroyd, in a characteristic metafictional twist, destroys the painfully built illusion of transcendence, bringing to the fore the fictionality and constructedness of his created world.

Peter Ackroyd's second novel, *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde* (1983), was unanimously praised by critics as an absorbing and moving novel, as well as a pastiche of the highest quality. As the title suggests, *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde* is a retrospective account of Wilde's life, supposedly written by him during the last months of his exile in Paris until his untimely death caused by the complications of the ear injury he had suffered in prison, by the moral dejection brought about by the ostracism and derision that followed the scandalous trial where he was convicted of indecent behavior, by being separated from family and friends, and by the financial penury consequent upon his conviction.

Formally, the novel follows the literary tradition of the "confession" of a repenting sinner who addresses an audience in order to "justify" his or her sins, a tradition that goes back to Saint Augustine and Rousseau, and is represented by British novels such as Daniel Defoe's *Roxana* (1724) and the second part of James Hogg's *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824). Although, in keeping with this tradition, Wilde's confession is explicitly addressed to a "you," the reason he gives for writing it is a desire to spell out the truth and real meaning of his life to himself, as he explains in words that echo Ackroyd's poem "Only connect . . . " (1978: 20): "I must connect [the past and future] with simple words: I owe that to myself. Now that I have seen my life turn completely in its fiery circle" (1984b: 3). For, as he reflects, "I have lied to myself. Now I must try to break the habit of a lifetime" (3). Structured as a daily journal, Wilde's confession runs from 11 August 1900 to 24 November 1900, includes a few newspaper cuttings from Wilde's lecturing tour to the United States (95–96), and ends with the reproduction of his death-bed feverish "talking taken down by Maurice Gilbert" (184–85), from 26 November 1900 until the day of his death, 30 November 1900.

An early reviewer, Mary Montaut (1984: 137), has pointed out: "The novel is painstakingly researched ('I had been hoping for jars of Koko-Marikopas, which turns my hair strangely brown')." Indeed, the

reference to Koko-Marikopas, the hair-dyer Wilde used in real life, is only one of the countless biographical facts Ackroyd offhandedly mixes in with his own fictional material: a whole gallery of relatives, close friends and acquaintances; of more or less well-known real episodes and anecdotes and even of tiny details of Oscar Wilde's life constantly recur in the novel to the point that a diligent comparison with the biographies and collected letters of Oscar Wilde would reveal a surprising exactness and the sheer bulk of the biographical data contained in the novel. This, together with the wonderfully accurate effect produced by the clever stylistic imitation of Wilde's witty, ironic style, function as strong realism-enhancing mechanisms that forcefully impel the reader to sympathize with Oscar Wilde — that is, to "pardon his sins" — and to lament the fact that the novel does not have a happy ending, as "Ackroyd plainly wants Wilde to have" (Montaut, 1984: 137).

As we have seen, poetry, fiction, and biography are part of the same creative process for Ackroyd. The generic hesitancy between biography and fiction wilfully established in *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde* implicitly enhances a definition of reality as complex and many-sided, containing the real and the unreal, and equating the fictional with the actually lived. In keeping with this definition of reality we soon find, interspersed with the retrospective "real" account of the writer's life, a series of "fictional" tales also told by Wilde that may be described as iconic variations on particular aspects of Wilde's confession. In the story of the "young prince, soon to become king of a great land and so powerful that his courtiers did not allow him to leave his palace" significantly called Sans Souci (84–87), Wilde rewrites Buddha's story as an allegory of the Ivory Tower of aestheticism to which he sacrificed his life. While the Buddha's way to perfection and Nirvana necessarily entailed his rejection of the artificial beauty and protection of his father's royal palace and his wholehearted embracing of the sorrow brought about by the passion and impermanence of real human existence, for the young aesthete in Wilde's tale, the discovery of "Poverty and Sorrow" and of "Passion and Joy" only leads to despair and suicide. Another story about the deadly consequences of pursuing the pleasures of beauty and passion is the tale of "the princess of Myrrhina [who] approaches the cave of the hermit, Honorius, to tempt him with her silks and perfumes" (92). The story ends with a double punishment: Honorius cannot resist the temptation to embrace Myrrha, but his embrace is so passionate that he expires, and the horrified temptress cannot free herself from his deadly embrace (93). Again, in the Celtic story of

"Tirnan-Og, the country of the young" (113), the bard Oisen[5] spends three-hundred years trying "to learn the secrets of that place" (114), only to understand that he had wasted his life in the futile pursuit of youth just before meeting his death, the "moment his feet touched his native earth" (114). The tale of "the Grove of Hyacinths" (146–49) — a tale that echoes the hyacinth garden in Eliot's "The Burial of the Dead" (1974: 46) — is also a story about the "barren journeying" (148) of a man in search of beauty and riches who, after crossing the "City of the Seven Sins" and the "Valley of Desolation," returns after many years to the hyacinth garden where he had left his sweetheart, only to discover that the evil face of the old king on the gold coins that had tempted him to go away is his own wasted face. In all these tales Wilde expresses in overtly fictional and figurative terms his complex emotional attitude towards aestheticism, art in general and the role of the modern artist in society in a way that beautifully complements the more objective (but not necessarily more truthful) information he gives in the confession.

Another tale, that of the "poet who sang of the secret things of the world" (62) may be described as a *mise en abyme* of the whole confession; that is, as a shorter story within the principal story that resumes the contents of the principal one (Bal, 1977: 106). The tale tells of a poet who, like Oscar Wilde, used to enchant the city with his "visions of terror and of beauty" until the day when he realizes that he has lied to them, that: "'In order to find praise, I have invented the secrets of the world.' And then he turned his face towards the blank sky, and saw only the emptiness of his own life" (63). When the poet tried to share this truth with the people, "they jeered at him, and some of them picked up stones to hurl at his back as he returned slowly to his own dwelling" (63).

Like the poet in the tale, Wilde had preferred beautiful lies to ugly truth and had tried to turn his own life into a work of art (3), only to discover one day, reading his name in the newspaper, that: "It was as if in that name, Oscar Wilde, there was a void in which I might fall and lose myself" (3). That is, he intuits that his process of degradation is a process of depersonalization accurately pinpointed by his successive changes of name: the original Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde (3) of his aristocratic boyhood, becomes, first an artist's name, Oscar Wilde, then, a convict's number, C. 3. 3., and finally Sebastian Melmoth (2), the pseudonym Wilde assumed after his release from prison, which combines two prototypes: the martyr and the outcast. The Roman martyr, Saint Sebastian, known as the Defender of Christendom, is also a favorite homosexual icon. The second name is that of Melmoth, the Wanderer, the protagonist of a Gothic tale written by an uncle of Wilde's mother, Charles Robert Maturin, in 1820. Beyond the family joke, the assumption of this name is a clear indication that Wilde saw himself as a romantic and damned tragic hero. The Wanderer (or also the Errant Jew) is a potent symbol who figures not only in Maturin but also in works by Coleridge, Shelley, and Byron and a host of other poems and novels of the Gothic period, including Matthew Lewis's *The Monk* (1794). His punishment is to wander forever, accursed and rejected by all.

[5] His name echoes that of Oisin, a legendary Gaelic warrior and bard, commonly known as Ossian.

At the beginning of the novel, Wilde offers the reader the "frontispiece" he has designed for his confession, of which, he says, "Only one copy [is to be] printed, in Japanese vellum, and exhibited in the Natural History Museum" (6). It reads:

THE MODERN WOMAN'S GUIDE
TO OSCAR WILDE

A Romance

This "frontispiece" displays not only Oscar Wilde's sardonic wit and characteristic ability to dismiss the most serious matters in a flourish of self-directed mockery and laughter, but also his incapacity to separate life from art. He can only write his autobiography as a romance, or rather, as we will see, as a Gothic romance. Like Laetitia Spender and other alienated characters in *The Great Fire of London*, Wilde feels an irresistible fascination for "the narrow streets of destitution," which he used to walk "unmolested [as a child] presumably because I did not fear them" (18). Years later, when he arrived in London for the first time, he was struck by the magic power in the millenarian city: "I saw London as a vast furnace . . . It was as if all the powers of the earth had become concentrated on this spot" (43), and immediately "took a nervous delight in walking through narrow courts and alleys among men and women of evil aspect" (42). Still, at that stage, the young artist justified his rejection of "the brightness" for "the shadow" simply in abstract intellectual terms: "I saw squalor and shame but to me they were picturesque only: I was not to discover their real secrets until later" (42). As he further explains, his interest for the poor and outcasts

of the world (98) led him to write an essay entitled *The Soul of Man under Socialism*, but still, as he reflects, "my interest in poverty was aesthetic primarily . . . . But now I believe that we are creating, in the poor, a society which will wreak a terrible vengeance on our own" (98–99). Wilde's intuitive perception of the magical potential of London and his fascination for the poor bring to mind the apocalyptic revolt of the tramps and the convicts in *The Great Fire of London* and add an interesting reason why he did not make any effort to avoid his dreadful fate, for, as he further explains: "It is my privilege — I understand it now to have become like them, to have become a byword for infamy, an indigent wanderer who must beg for his bread" (99).

Wilde narrates his progressive degradation from aristocrat and artist to convict and tramp in purely literary terms, as a descent into hell originally motivated by the aesthetic desire to "sin beautifully," to try all forms of sensual pleasure as a way of refining his intelligence (108). This descent into hell involved undertaking a pilgrimage along the labyrinthine and dark recesses of an atemporal, magical London, where sexual practices took on proportions of satanic propitiatory rites:

> Blue Anchor Lane, Bombay Street, Grace's Alley, Wellclose Square. I searched the night-houses and the shameful corners of those streets for Lazarus, and when I found him I insisted upon kissing his lips . . . . In the delirium of my lust . . . I could glimpse dimly then the secret of those sexual rites in which gods and spirits are raised. (108)

A characteristic feature of Gothic fiction is the psychological self-fragmentation of the hero, who often suffers hallucinatory visions of himself split in two, one watching, and the other performing the crimes. For example, Robert, the "justified sinner" in James Hogg's Gothic tale, is persuaded by his own "shadow" to commit a whole series of dreadful murders. In Gustav Meyrink's *Der Golem* (1915), the living manlike monster of clay is Athanasius Pernath's double or doppelgänger. A more rationally motivated version of the same would be Robert Louis Stevenson's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886). Wilde is warned about the risk of self-fragmentation he is running on several occasions. For example, during the trip to America, he is shocked and disgusted by the ease with which "the credulous population assumed at once that [the actor John] Howson was Wilde" (54). Years later, at the Trocadero, he was shattered by the casual discovery that the comic actor Arthur Faber was impersonating him: "I saw myself at that instant as others saw me, and I felt a terrible sense of fatality" (117). And, once on the downslope of perversion, Wilde "experienced the strange fantasies of the double life": "I could see my own image in the eyes of those boys as I bent over them. I was two personalities the one watching with heavy-lidden eyes the other's experience of bliss" (109).

Another staple feature of Gothic fiction and romantic literature in general is the association of bastardy with evil. This idea, rooted in the belief that the sin is physically transmitted to the child during conception, may be traced back in literature to the emergence in sixteenth-century drama and satire of such bastard villains as, for example, Don John, the fictional bastard brother of Pedro III of Aragon, in *Much Ado About Nothing*. Similarly, the bastardy of James Hogg's fiendish hero, Robert, is repeatedly hinted at, as is also that of Ambrosio, the evil monk in Matthew Lewis's Gothic tale. Confusing his life with that of a Gothic hero, Wilde believed — as did his mother, who was a friend of Mme. Blavatski, the cofounder of the Theosophic Society — that his downfall and damnation were predetermined by his sinful conception: "she [Lady Wilde] came to me weeping and told me that she held herself responsible for my fate, and that the punishment I was suffering was for her own sin: that I was not Sir William's child. I am illegitimate" (29). Wilde embraces his destiny with the heedlessness of a tragic hero, often adapting his behavior against his better reason in order to meet the expectations of his assumed role. In other words, Wilde writes himself into existence, making good the aestheticist tenet that Life always follows Art: "It was of no concern to me if the facts were accurate or inaccurate: I had discerned a truth which was larger than that of biography and history, a truth . . . about the nature of all creative art" (121).

Describing his fateful relationship with Bosie — Lord Alfred Taylor — Wilde underlines the decisive role played by his imagination in their sensual pursuit of pleasure and the progressive unreality of the whole relationship, in words that bring to mind both *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *The Waste Land* and take for granted the visionary nature of London:

> As we became more frenzied in our pursuit of pleasure, London itself became an unreal city, a play of brilliant lights and crowds and mad laughter. My boldness infected Bosie . . . . He wished to become precisely the portrait of him which I had formed in my imagination and so he became terrible, because my imagination was terrible also. (127)

We discussed previously how Pound and Eliot tried to transcend the subjectivity and fragmentation of individual perception, striving, in Ackroyd's words, "towards the Absolute . . . by means of a steady en-

largement of our knowledge and a continual search for system, unity and coherence." The striving for absolute knowledge is also at the heart of Oscar Wilde's reckless sexual experimentation, for, as he explains, "in excess is to be found a terrible purity, the purity of the gods" (128). These words betray Wilde's faith in occultism, which he shared with his mother as well as with Yeats and with many Irish contemporaries. According to hermetic, gnostic, and cabbalistic theory and to occultism in general, the true God is defined as The One, the totality of everything, containing all good and evil, and reconciling all opposites. Consequently, in order to transcend the human condition and become god-like, the magician must experience and master all things, whatever their conventional labels as good or evil.[6] This need to experiment all would explain Wilde's irresistible fascination for places like the "Château Rouge . . . where the poor and the vagabond sleep," for, as he recalls: "Jesus became an outcast in order that he might represent the true image of mankind. And, where once I would have shrunk back in horror from the sight, now I looked on with interest. I have seen into the heart of the world: why should I not look upon its face also?" (58, 59).

Wilde's conviction that Jesus had to become an outcast in order to represent the true image of mankind brings to mind the symbolic role of the tramps and convicts in *The Great Fire of London* and in *Hawksmoor* and goes a long way towards explaining the meaning Wilde gives to his own process of degradation. He sees it in mythical terms, as a hero's quest for transcendence involving several painful though necessary stages of initiation. The first one is the voluntary acceptance of the process itself: "I knew that I would leave prison as a pauper . . . I alone had to decide the nature of my new life" (158). The second is the stage of *sparagmos*, or the tearing to pieces of body and soul: "My personality had been stripped from me, piece by piece" (143); "I gave myself up to the hands of others" (145). The third is ritual death and rebirth: "It was a death worse than physical death because I knew I would survive it and be raised as Lazarus was raised — Lazarus who wept continually after his resurrection" (145). The rebirth of the mythical hero usually brings about his assumption to a higher plane of being, that is, his transformation into cosmic man, or *anthropos*. However, the achievement of this goal is constantly threatened by the possibility of

[6] In Richard Cavendish's words: "The elect are not those who lead good lives, but those who are enlightened, who possess the knowledge of the divine. The sin that cuts man off from God is not any form of moral backdrop, but ignorance" (1984: 82).

reincarnation. Wilde senses that his ritual death is leading him backward — "I am borne backwards, as if on a tide" (178) — to the beginning of a new life — "I returned to the terrible nakedness of childhood, alone and afraid" (143) — and he is perfectly aware that time and history are cyclical "the idea of progress is an absurdity" (181). However, with characteristic irony, he hides the anguish produced by this knowledge and the fear that he will not find a way out of the endless round of reincarnations with an offhand remark: "The proprietor of the hotel, I cannot remember his name, asked me if this was the first year of the twentieth century or the last year of the nineteenth: I advised him to ask his children. Only they know" (179). For Wilde — and also for Nicholas Dyer in *Hawksmoor* — children "know" better because he believes with Plato that they still remember their divine origin.[7] In other words, Wilde's backward movement from man to beggar and then to child can be interpreted both as the cyclical return to the beginning of a new reincarnation, or as a transcendental movement away from Darkness and towards the Light of revelation.

We have seen how, in *The Great Fire of London*, the possibility of transcendence brought about by the apocalyptic fire was severely undermined by the metafictional revelation of the textuality of the novel, how, in an alternative reading, characters and god-like Author alike remained trapped within the cardboard walls of an all-encompassing textual world, forever yielding specular reproductions of itself. Musing about his impending death, Wilde wonders whether he will remain alive in the memory of the people — "it is improbable, is it not, that anything I have said or done will survive me?" — or whether his martyrdom, like that of Saint Procopius, will be "wonderfully increased by each succeeding legend." He concludes that distortion is inevitable, that, as soon as Maurice starts taking dictation from him, "he will in-

[7] Wordsworth beautifully synthesized Plato's theory in "Intimations of Immortality": "Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting:/ The Soul that rises with us, our life's Star,/ Hath had elsewhere its setting,/ And cometh from afar:/ Not in entire forgetfulness,/ And not in utter nakedness,/ But trailing clouds of glory do we come/ From God, who is our home:/ Heaven lies about us in our infancy! / Shades of the prison-house begin to close/ Upon the growing Boy,/ But He beholds the light, and whence it flows,/ He sees it in his joy;/ The Youth, who daily farther from the east/ Must travel, still is Nature's Priest,/ And by the vision splendid/ Is on his way attended;/ At length the Man perceives it die away,/ and fade into the light of common day." (Davies, ed., 1975, 107).

vent my last hours." That is, Wilde is perfectly aware that each successive version of his life will be the subjective misreading of the biographer. However, he is not at all worried by this prospect. On the contrary, he believes that, as happened with Saint Procopius, "it was the legends that worked the miracles, not the bones" (180).

A few days before his death, Wilde remembered the picture of a prince he had seen in the Louvre and wished he could go back to that point in history, that he could "enter another man's heart," for, as he explains: "In that moment of transition, when I was myself and someone else, of my own time and in another's, the secrets of the universe would stand revealed" (181). His ironic suggestion that he wishes he could take up the personality of the figure in a picture, and not the other way round — as happened in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* — may be read as evidence that he believes Art to be a life-giving and superior form of reality, and it is clear that he considers this kind of transcendence as a form of illumination, for as he approaches the hour of his death, he "long[s] to enter the noisy thoroughfares and dilapidated courtyards of Balzac's imagination" (181), and he dies laughing with the joy of knowing that "then once more I shall be lord of language and lord of life" (185).

F. H. Bradley and T. S. Eliot postulated the existence of an Absolute Logos in the realm of the sublime, capable of transcending the limitations of conceptual knowledge and of granting an overall vision of reality as "One." For Wilde, the aesthete, the Absolute Logos becomes Absolute Beauty and the realm of the sublime, the imaginative world of Art, an equally sublime, unitary, atemporal, and ideal world, where the strong masters and heroes of Western civilization transcend their individuality and live forever in the joyous contemplation of Absolute Truth: "Dante walks in exile at the same time as Augustus speaks in the marked place of Tyre, and Samson is led into the air by a boy" (181).

This reading would give an unsuspected transcendental dimension to *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde* and to the master-pupil relationship between Oscar Wilde and Peter Ackroyd. From Wilde's aestheticist perspective, the novel would become the artistic (or textual) higher plane of being toward which Wilde has made his transcendental escape, while Ackroyd's accurate and loving recreation of the style and voice of his strong predecessor could be interpreted as conclusive evidence that the master did manage to enter the heart of the younger writer, and continues speaking through him, as Little Dorrit did through Audrey Skelton.

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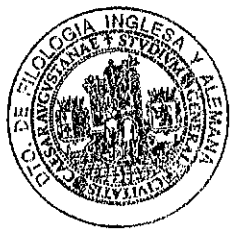

2: *Hawksmoor*, *Chatterton*, and *First Light*

WE HAVE SEEN THE CENTRAL ROLE ACKROYD GIVES in *The Great Fire of London* and *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde* to London as the visionary city built on the accumulated wisdom of numberless generations of Londoners whose roots go back to the dawn of English civilization. This vision of a numinous London is also the topos around which *Hawksmoor* and the other London-based novels develop. In this sense we may regard *Hawksmoor* as a pointed example of what Roz Kaveney has called the "generic London novel," a purely English genre that develops around a mythical vision of London as "the city of possibilities allow[ing] a perpetual reinvention of the self." According to Kaveney the genre goes back to Dickens — and, we could add, to Defoe — includes "the Gothic London of detective and horror fiction," and is best represented by the work of Gerald Kersh, Patrick Hamilton, and Arthur Machen, with Peter Ackroyd and Iain Sinclair as its "principal current practitioners" (1994: 39). Kaveney's contention is ratified by Ackroyd's readiness to admit that Sinclair (and also Michael Moorcock and the poet Douglas Oliver) are interested in the same "specific kinds of literature which I am interested in" (Onega, 1996: 211), as well as by the fact that, in the writer's acknowledgments for *Hawksmoor*, Ackroyd openly expresses his "obligation to Iain Sinclair's poem, *Lud Heat*, which first directed my attention to the stranger characteristics of the London churches."[1]

Iain Sinclair's *Lud Heat* (1975) is significantly subtitled "a book of the dead hamlets." In Book One, "The Muck Rake," Sinclair devotes the first section to "Nicholas Hawksmoor, His Churches" (426). He refers in it to the Act of Parliament of 1711 providing taxes for the acquisition of sites, burial grounds, and parsonages for the building of fifty churches in London and Westminster to replace those burnt in the Great Fire of 1666. The architects in charge of the project were Sir Christopher Wren, Sir John Vanbrugh, and Nicholas Hawksmoor. Although only six out of the fifty churches (St. Alfege's, Greenwich; St. Anne's, Limehouse; St. George's-in-the-East; Christ Church, Spitalfields; St. George's, Bloomsbury; and St. Mary Woolnoth) were wholly

[1] Cf. Onega, 1997a, on the visionary London novel.

Hawksmoor's, it was this architect that the Commission asked to devise "one general design or forme" (5) for the building project as a whole.

Sinclair's contention is that Hawksmoor planned the churches according to a strict "geometry of oppositions" (5), capable of producing a "system of energies, or unit of connection, within the city," similar to those formed by "the old hospitals, the Inns of Court, the markets, the prisons, the religious houses and the others" (10). As Sinclair explains, Hawksmoor arranged Christ Church, St. George's in-the-East, and St. Anne's, Limehouse, to form a power-concentrating triangle, while "St George's, Bloomsbury, and St. Alfege's, Greenwich, make up the major pentacle star" (5) the quincunxial pattern to which Spenser Spender alludes in *The Great Fire of London*.

The vision of London as an intricate net of emblematic buildings accumulating through time the occult power of its millenarian inhabitants is the basic idea around which the plot of *Hawksmoor* develops. The novel is an astonishing *tour de force* that attempts to recreate the confused and contradictory intellectual atmosphere of the period of the Enlightenment from the double perspective of both its emergent empiricism and its strong undercurrent of submerged and repressed occult practices. In the novel, the values of the empiricist New Science are embodied by Sir Christopher Wren and the members of the Royal Society, while Wren's assistant architect, Nicholas Dyer, is the champion of what Cedric D. Reverand II has described as "all that the Age of Reason is not" (1987: 104), that is, of the world of darkness and fear, or irrationality and magic, which, as Frances Yates (1977) has amply demonstrated, stood in complementary opposition to the belief in reason and the law of cause and effect of the Enlightenment.

The novel echoes the coexistence of official empiricism and these subterranean magical practices through its all-encompassing duality. Structurally, duality is expressed in the combination of two apparently different stories: one is that of the eighteenth-century architect, Nicholas Dyer; the other, that of the twentieth-century detective, Nicholas Hawksmoor. The odd-numbered chapters, situated in the eighteenth century, cover the span of Nicholas Dyer's life: 1654–1715, which he recreates in a first-person narration supposedly written between 1711 and 1715, during the time he was employed to build the churches. These chapters, presented as the first-person retrospective account of Dyer, conform to the tradition of the "confession" or "true account" of, in this case, an "*un*repenting sinner," and, in accordance

with a well-established narrative convention,[2] include realistic accounts of the effects of the Plague (1665) and of the Great Fire of London (1666) as experienced by Dyer when he was a teenager, and also of Dyer's initiation and conversion to a Satanic faith. Part of the realism-enhancing effect is Dyer's style, which looks like a convincing pastiche of eighteenth-century style, even though eighteenth-century specialists are ready to find fault with it, as is the case, for example, with Cedric D. Reverand II, who thinks that "Ackroyd's notion of the appropriate style seems at times idiosyncratic and more Jacobean-Mannerist than late seventeenth-early eighteenth century" (1987: 104).

In the even-numbered chapters, an external narrator reports the investigation carried out by the twentieth-century detective, Nicholas Hawksmoor, to solve a series of mysterious murders recently committed near the churches built by Dyer. That is to say, the novel combines two parallel stories separated in time by a gap of two centuries but closely related in space, as both the eighteenth- and the twentieth-century murders have taken place in the vicinity of the seven (instead of the historical six) churches built by Dyer. Interestingly, fictional characters existing in the eighteenth-century chapters reappear in those devoted to the twentieth century, as happens with the assistants of Dyer and Hawksmoor, respectively called Walter Pyne and Walter Payne, and with the victims murdered near the churches, whose names are, with slight variations, the same.[3] The same fragments of popular songs, ballads, and poems are heard in the streets of London in both historical periods, as well, providing an ominous and often uncanny background to the action. There is also a striking complementarity between the twentieth-century detective Nicholas Hawksmoor and the eighteenth-century architect, Nicholas Dyer. Their shared Christian names and the surname "Dyer" already suggest the existence between them of the doppelgänger relationship characteristic of Gothic fiction. This impression is further enhanced by their identical appearance and behavior: both lead solitary lives, have terrifying dreams, are aloof and reluctant to communicate, and are interested in puzzles; both are dark-haired and tall; both wear glasses that they accidentally break; both are betrayed by their assistants; and both have visions of themselves separate

[2] An early example would be Thomas Nashe's description of the plague in Rome in *The Unfortunate Traveller* (1594), but the most influential intertext of the novel is Daniel Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year* (1665).

[3] Cf. Onega, 1991a: 34, for a more detailed analysis of these coincidences.

from their own bodies. Moreover, they both feel a strong wish at a certain point to dress and behave like tramps (like Laetitia Spender in *The Great Fire of London* or Oscar Wilde in *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde*), and they are darkly aware that they are undergoing a process of self-fragmentation and alienation from society.

At the same time, the reader also senses the strange communion of Dyer and Hawksmoor with the victims and tramps they respectively pursue or investigate. So, for example, when Dyer contemplates the face of the strangled woman found floating on the Thames, he experiences her fear and pain (1988a: 978). Another example would be when Dyer guides the knife that kills the tramp called Ned. It is Dyer, not Ned, who "let slip an *Ay me* as I crouched to see him in the Darkness beneath the Church" (66). This interchangeability of murderer and victim is also suggested in the twentieth-century version of Ned's murder, when the external narrator explains how the second Ned, after pondering the futility of his life, contemplates his own suicide/murder as if it were from the outside: "He had come to the flight of steps which led down to the door of the crypt, and, as he sensed the coldness which rose from them like a vapour, he heard a whisper which might have been 'I' or 'me'. And then the shadow fell" (86). But the reverse also holds, for, parallel to Dyer's identification with the victims, we also find that the victims identify themselves with Dyer. Thus, whereas Dyer's favourite book as a child was *Dr. Faustus* (18), the child Thomas Hill's was *Dr. Faustus and Queen Elizabeth* (33), and Thomas likes to crouch behind the small pyramid of Spitalfields church (Dyer's favourite place, as a child) where he indulges in imagining "the building of his own church" (28). Similarly, detective Hawksmoor, after interviewing Brian Wilson, a neurotic young man who accuses himself of the murders, realizes that he belongs to the same class of desperately lonely people: "I will be like them because I deserve to be like them, and only the smallest accident separates me from them now" (164). More puzzling still, Hawksmoor is also associated with Sir Christopher Wren. For example, the visit to Bedlam by "Sir Chris." and Dyer, which comes to a climax with the "Demoniack," is repeated by Hawksmoor when he visits the sanatorium to see his father. Again, Sir Christopher Wren's lecture on "Rational Experiment and the Observation of Cause and Effect," delivered at the Royal Society (140), is echoed by Hawksmoor's lecturing of his subordinates at Scotland Yard on the behavior of murderers (159). Indeed, as we go on reading, we find more and more shocking reduplications of names, events, actions, and even identical sentences uttered by characters who live two centuries apart,

until we are forced to conclude that, in the novel, nothing progresses in time, that the same events repeat themselves endlessly, and that the same people live and die only in order to be born and to live the same events again and again, eternally caught in what appears to be the ever-revolving wheel of life and death. The same wheel Dyer recognizes in Sir Christopher Wren's experiment of the "Moving Picture" (141–42).

This interchangeability of characters and circularity of the events narrated is enhanced structurally by the device of using the same words to end and to begin adjacent chapters, thus, for instance, where chapter 1 ends "I am in the Pitte, but I have gone so deep that I can see the brightness of the Starres at Noon" (25), the second chapter begins, "At noon they were approaching the church in Spitalfields" (25); likewise, where chapter 2 ends, "And when he looked up he saw the face above him" (42), chapter 3 begins, "The face above me then became a Voice" (43) and so on until chapter 12. These semantic connections between the chapters devoted to the eighteenth-century and the twentieth-century stories may be said to function as temporal bridges, rendering ineffectual the time gaps that logically exist between the two stories.

Stylistically, circularity is expressed through the repetition of key words, such as "pattern," "shadow," "time," "child," "tramp," and "dust," which recurrently point to the most complex layers of meaning underlying the surface message of the novel. Moreover, the crisscrossing of references does not move, as one might expect, in a single direction, from the eighteenth to the twentieth century, but rather works forward and backward at the same time, disrupting traditional notions of chronological linearity in favor of a circular, or mythical conception of time.

This circular conception of time is in keeping with Nicholas Dyer's occultist faith. In his confession Dyer narrates how, after surviving the apocalyptic Great Fire of 1666, he was saved from starvation by Mirabilis, a mysterious magus who recognised in him the marks of the "elect" at the time of the dreadful plague, when orphaned and homeless, the boy had become a wandering beggar in the streets of London. Mirabilis was the religious leader of a Satanic occult society known as the "Enthusiasticks" (90). He taught the child that "it was Cain who built the first City" and gave to him "a full Conception of Degenerated Nature" (9), ingrafting in the boy's mind as an article of faith the belief in the existence of a *mundus tenebrosus*, whose occult mysteries can only be penetrated by those versed in the *Scientia Umbrarum*, an oc-

cult science developed out of neolithic, hermetic, cabbalistic, and gnostic elements.

Consequently, Dyer believes that rationality is utterly reductionist, and he despises the conventional morality of Christianity, as endorsed by the vicar of St. Mary Woolnoth, the Shaftesburian benevolist Mr. Priddon. Throughout the novel we see Sir Christopher Wren and Nicholas Dyer leading parallel lives: both use the same library, have the same job, are interested in geometry, mathematics, religion, and the mysteries of life and death. But while Wren uses his reasoning capacity as the only test of truth, Dyer relies on the *nous*, the intuitive capacity. Thus, for example, in order to investigate the death of a woman found floating on the Thames, Wren undertakes to make an autopsy. After examining the body, he tentatively remarks that he is "induced to believe that she was knocked down with a Blow on her left Ear, from the large Settlement of Blood there" (97), and after studying her entrails, he advances the hypothesis that "She is not long Dead" (97). Dyer, who is present during the autopsy, also reads the marks left on the body, but in a way that recalls the foretelling of omens by augurs reading the entrails of animals. He is so receptive to the spiritual effluvia the corpse emanates that, without having to touch it, he immediately knows that the woman was murdered: he hears the voice of the murderer addressing her and even "saw the first Blow and suffer'd the first Agonie of her Pain" (97). Totally unaware of the fact that Dyer's insight into the causes of the woman's death are much more accurate than his own, Wren lends an ironic touch to the session when he says to his assistant: "And so ends your first Anatomy lesson" (98).

The unbridgeable differences between the *Scientia Umbrarum* and the empiricist New Science[4] are fully revealed on the occasion when Dyer is obliged to wait in the library of the Royal Society while Wren is performing an experiment in public. While he waits, Dyer reads the titles of the books around him, finding among them a copy of Dr. Burnet's *New System of the World* that has a handwritten addendum to its frontispiece: "IN CONFUTATION OF MOSES." Soon after this he knocks his head against "a strange Bird petrified and suspended upon a Wire" and is informed by a fellow of the Society that "It is a white-fronted Goose from Aegypt" (138). The fellow then shows him a series of stuffed or preserved rarities including "a Serpent found in the Entrails of a Living Man . . . Insects which breed in Man's teeth and

[4] Cf. Onega, 1991b: 117–38, on these differences.

flesh . . . a Monkey from the Indies which is tall as a Man . . . some marine gems from the Islands of Barbados [and even an] Abortive put up in Pickle which . . . we dissect tomorrow" (139). The reference to Moses, the reputed founder of the Cabbala, like the presence of the white ibis, the Egyptian symbol of the immortality of the soul, literally presents the empirical New Science as in dialectic opposition to hermetico-cabbalist magic. The serpent also fulfills this function, for while for the empiricists of the Royal Society the sight of a "Serpent found in the Entrails of a Living Man" is just a rare natural phenomenon in need of interpretation, for a gnostic like Nicholas Dyer it can be nothing other than the shocking materialization of one of Gnosticism's basic allegories: Eve-as-spiritual-self living inside Adam-as-human-soul.

The "Monkey from the Indies which is tall as a Man," which the twentieth-century reader might interpret as a hint that the fellows of the Royal Society were already preparing the field for Darwin's theory of evolution, has for Dyer a different significance. In an allegorical drawing of Nature and Art, the Rosicrucian magus Robert Fludd (Yates, 1977: 144–5, and illustration no. 10), places a monkey at the center of the earth, linked by a chain to a woman representing the celestial world. In this allegory the monkey occupies the central position not as the evolutionary ancestor of Man, but because of its capacity for mimicry, that is, as an allegory of "Man's Art" by which he imitates Nature and so, by extension, as an allegory of the magician's capacity to act upon the world through the use of sympathetic magic. Likewise, the "Insects which breed in Man's teeth and flesh" refer back to Dyer's remark: "I saw the Flies on this Dunghill Earth, and then considered who their Lord might be" (17); that is, for Dyer, they can only be interpreted as evidence that the earth belongs to Satan, the Lord of the Flies. This is the reason why, when Mirabilis fell into an ecstasy and lay senseless upon the ground, "the Assembly took great Care that no Gnat, Fly or other Animal touch him" (20). The association of flies with evil is also suggested by the fact that the tramps, and Dyer too, are lice-ridden, and flies and bugs often disturb Nicholas Hawksmoor's investigations.

In sum, the apparently matter-of-fact remark of the fellow of the Royal Society who is showing the stuffed and pickled rarities to Dyer that "the Mysteries of Nature will soon be Mysteries no more" (139) can only be interpreted by Dyer as the threatening announcement of the annihilation of the *Scientia Umbrarum* by the New Science. Shocked and dismayed by this experience, Dyer decides to enter the room where Wren is carrying out his experiment. Wren has put a black

cat in a "glass Chamber" and is exhausting the air within with the help of an "Air-Pump," so that the cat "fell into Convulsions and would have expir'd but that the Air was again admitted" (140). What for an empiricist is simply a demonstration of how to make a vacuum in an enclosed place, can for a satanist like Dyer only be interpreted as an attempt to trap and suffocate Satan himself, for the black cat is the most potent symbol of Satan that recurs in the novel. Like the flies, the black cat is often heard or seen near the places where the tramp with the matted hair and the dark overcoat, nicknamed "The Architect," makes his appearance, and is associated with Satan in his role of evil *cosmocrator*, or Universal Architect.

A most important aspect of Dyer's faith, therefore, is the belief that Satan has authority over this world. The eighteenth-century magician appears to be literally crushed by the weight of this awful knowledge. He has dreadful nightmares and is in constant fear of "falling into the Pitte" (101); ghosts and spirits assail him with their murmurs and sighs; he dreads visitors and strangers and imagines everyone to be plotting his murder. However, he also believes with Mirabilis and the members of the Black Step Lane occult society that the only way to escape the desperate destiny of mankind is to attempt to delve in the kind of occult knowledge capable of bringing about his essential transformation into the *anthropos*, the cosmic man.

In his biography of William Blake (1995), Ackroyd explains how the visionary poet and engraver enthusiastically shared the belief of his young contemporary, the Neoplatonist philosopher Thomas Taylor, "that there was a body of ancient knowledge or *prisca sapientia* that had been conveyed through the ages of the world by such revered figures as Orpheus, Hermes Trismegistus, Zoroaster and of course Plato himself. It was the knowledge enshrined in the cabbala, and in the ancient myths already vouchsafed to Blake through the pages of Bryant and others." In his first treatise, *Concerning the Beautiful*, Taylor announced that: "Every one, therefore, must become divine, and of godlike beauty, before he can gaze upon a god, and the beautiful itself." As Ackroyd further explains: "This is standard alchemical doctrine, and suggests how close Taylor's Neoplatonism came to occult magic and to the whole array of spiritual dissent which marked Blake's period" (1995: 90). It seems highly likely, then, that Taylor's and Blake's occultist belief that man can become godlike is the same belief that prompts Nicholas Dyer's behavior. As Richard Cavendish (1984: 338) has pointed out, the assumption of divinity, that is, the transformation from man into *anthropos*, can only take place after accomplishing a

Great Work comparable to the cosmogonic act, that is, equivalent to God's act of creation of the cosmos.

From classical times to the Copernican revolution, the Western world has had a notion of the universe according to which it is made of nine spheres, arranged like the skins of an onion. The outer skin is the sphere of God as Prime Mover. Inside this is the sphere of the stars and inside this again are the seven spheres of the seven planets. The innermost sphere belongs to the moon and the earth hangs inside it. Cavendish explains how in the early centuries after Christ the idea spread through the Mediterranean world that the soul comes originally from God and descends through the nine spheres to earth, where it is imprisoned in a human body. The soul longs for reunion with God and can achieve it by climbing back through the spheres of heaven. However,

> each sphere is guarded by angels and the space between the earth and the moon is crowded with legions of devils. Even when the soul has successfully negotiated the devils, the guardians of the spheres will try to turn it back. Only those initiated into the secret traditions know the passwords which will make the guardians yield and open their gates for the soul to continue on its way to God[5] (1984: 84).

This theory neatly synthesizes the real aim that lies behind Dyer's construction of the seven churches. In order to transcend the material world, Dyer must find a way to cross the seven intermediate planetary spheres, controlled, as he believes, by seven star-daemons whose task is precisely to prevent this ascent to the spiritual realm. Dyer's obsession with creating a geometric pattern with his churches capable of reflecting the "Proportion of the Seven Orders" through calculation of "the positions and influences of the Celestial bodies and the Heavenly Orbs" (5) has to be understood in the light of the second of the seven hermetic principles contained in the *Kybalion*, the Principle of Correspondence, synthetically expressed in the dictum "as below, so above: as above, so below."[6] This principle, which is considered the cornerstone

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[5] This theory is curiously enhanced by Tom Shippey's remark that "From southern Britain there are only nine bright stars" (1996: 19).

[6] In the Latin version of *The Emerald Table of Hermes Trismegistus*, one of the most influential of the magical treatises of the *Hermetica*, it reads: *quod superius est sicut quod inferius est et quod inferius est sicut quod superius ad perpetranda miracula rei unius* [that which is above is like that which is below

of sympathetic magic, synthesizes the theory that man is the earthly counterpart of God and that events on earth parallel the doings of God in heaven. So, events in the sky are signals of events on earth, but the contrary also holds, that is, occurrences on earth are evidence of conditions in heaven. Consequently the magician capable of manipulating events here "below" can affect the course of events "above" (Cavendish, 1984: 13, 17).

Therefore, by projecting a certain pattern by means of his church building that is capable of reflecting the "Proportion of the Seven Orders," Dyer is literally attempting to reproduce the pattern cast by the seven fixed stars that control the intermediate planetary spheres, thus hoping to submit to his will the seven planetary daemons who control them, and whose exotic names bring to mind the seven terrible *maskim* of Babylonian occultism:

> Spittle-Fields, Wapping and Limehouse have made the Triangle; Bloomsbury and St Mary Woolnoth have next created the major Pentacle-starre; and, with Greenwich, all these will form the Sextuple abode of Baal-Berith or the Lord of the Covenant. Then, with the church of Little St Hugh, the Septilateral Figure will rise about Black Step Lane and, in this Pattern, every Straight line is enrich'd with a point at Infinity and every Plane with a line at Infinity. Let him that has Understanding count the Number: the lower Orbs of Heaven, the seven Circles of the Heavens, the seven Starres in Ursa Minor and the seven Starres in the Pleiades. Little St Hugh was flung in the Pitte with the seven Marks upon his Hands, Feet, Sides and Breast which thus exhibit the seven Demons — Beydelus, Metucgayn, Adulec, Demeymes, Gadix, Uquizuz and Sol. *I have built an everlasting Order, which I may run through laughing: no one can catch me now* (186, my emphasis).

Here is clearly stated the real purpose of Dyer's awe-inspiring and painful endeavors: to build an everlasting order which would permit his crossing the seven planetary orbs that separate the material from the spiritual world. Following the principles of sympathetic magic, Dyer reproduces with his churches the pattern of the seven planetary orders, and he ensures that the pattern will be effective and powerful — what Iain Sinclair calls "a system of energies, or unit of connection, within the city" — by concentrating within the septilateral figure the same kind of evil powers the seven fixed stars cast. In other words, Dyer de-

and that which is below is like that which is above, to achieve the wonders of the one thing] (Cavendish, 1984: 13).

vises his churches as a huge talisman. This is why he builds them near ancient cemeteries and buries a sacrificial victim under their foundations, for, in his words: "when there are many Persons dead, only being buryed and laid in the Earth, there is an Assembling of Powers" (23).

The tramp called Ned and the other tramps Dyer kills are described as "counterfeit Aegyptias" (63) and as "vagrants," that is, as ancient wanderers (77, 82 and 88). Like the Wandering Jew of the medieval legend that became a staple of eighteenth-century Gothic fiction, (and also like Beckett's tramps, and like Eliot's "hollow men" with whom they are constantly associated), they are condemned to move in circles (73) and to bear on their shoulders the inherited sin of their whole race. In their rejection of the ways of the world and in the drastic reduction of their intellectual and social life these vagrants are comparable to children (65) and so constitute the best possible subverted equivalent of the virgin boy martyrs that Dyer needs as sacrificial victims for his churches.

Dyer is fascinated by these tramps because they display in its true horror the degenerated condition of human nature. In a paradoxical inversion of the Christian mystical ascension, these tramps are literally and symbolically hurled to the bottom of the pit "where they see the true Face of God which is like unto their own" (63). When they reach the point of no return, these vagrants stop wandering and converge on certain areas of London (as happens in *The Great Fire of London*). At this stage they meet a fearful looking "tramp with a dark heavy overcoat and matted hair" (74) who takes them to the brink of the abyss and helps them kill themselves. From this perspective, the episode in which Ned identifies with the terrified black cat attempting to escape torture and death at the hands of a frenzied, blood-thirsty gang of children becomes an apt proleptic icon of Dyer's attempt to escape the clutches of the planetary daemons that prevent him from crossing the spheres and from achieving his transcendental assumption to the spiritual realm (81).

The children who torment the cat to death are the same gang of children who had terrorized the child Thomas Hill (30–31), and the same "group of small children" who, two hundred years later, would kill a vagrant by "setting him alight in his drunken sleep" (198). This tramp is killed, and many others "abused or assaulted by gangs who used the excuse of 'the child murderer' to express their resentment at harmless wandering men" (198). Thus, in accordance with Dyer's theory that the world is like "a vast Machine . . . in which Men move by Rote" (144), despite all the apparent differences in names, time and place, in truth, all tramps are just

one tramp, all children, just one child. Tramps and children switch roles of murderer and victim in the same way Dyer and Hawksmoor constantly identify with each other and with the children and tramps they respectively murder or investigate. From this perspective, we can conclude that Dyer's quest for transcendence has an archetypal or representative character: his struggle is that of man condemned to play in succession the complementary roles of beggar, sinner, and punisher, with only the tiniest hope of getting out of this cyclical "fall into history," this never-ending "Moving Picture" (141–42 and 144), this material world ruled by Satan and governed by the evil power of the stars (21). In this light, Dyer's task may be seen as that of a Redeemer, struggling to bring about the liberation of humankind from this *mundus tenebrosus*, for his talismanic septilateral figure is a veritable *imago mundi*, a reproduction of the cosmos that functions as a ladder between heaven and earth that he (and those willing to share his gnosis) "may run through laughing." In this respect, the fact that his act of recreation of the cosmogonic act has been achieved by evil means is immaterial, for according to occultism — as Oscar Wilde well knew — the true God is the totality of everything, containing all good and evil and reconciling all opposites. Thus, in Nicholas Dyer's own words:

> *demon* [comes] from *daimon*, which is us'd promiscuously with *theos* as the word for Deity; the Persians call the Devill *Div*, somewhat close to *Divus* or *Deus*; also, *ex sacramenti* is expounded in Tertulian as *exacramentum* or *excrement* (21–22).

These words echo W. B. Yeats's chosen name as member of the Order of the Golden Dawn: "D. E. D. I." (*Daemon est Deus inversus*). Both synthesize the core of gnostic, cabbalistic, and occultist faith, according to which God is the source of both good and evil, and justify the magician's need to know all in order to become godlike.[7]

[7] Ackroyd refers to the same in *The Life of Thomas More*, when he alludes to More's use of scatological terms and dirty jokes in his writings: "if you believe human nature to be fallen from grace, and irredeemably flawed, then there is no reason to be discreet or fastidious about its material properties. It might be useful, even beneficial, to parody them. But there is also a positive delight in the material world; in the sacrifice of the Mass, for example, Christ's actual body was believed to animate the bread and wine. If the natural order might act as a visible token of an invisible sign, then the sacramental and the excremental can be seen in tacit partnership" (1998: 34). In a later novel, the Renaissance magus Doctor John Dee will make a similar point, when he plays with the reversibility of God/Dog (Ackroyd, 1993b: 106). Cf. Chapter 3.

At the beginning of his narration, Dyer, instructing his assistant Walter Pyne on the basics of transcendental architecture, compares architectural design with the writing of a book. His comparison brings to mind the medieval Christian belief that God, the *cosmocrator*, or Universal Architect, is the author of the Book of Nature. Dyer believes that the ancients had achieved a true understanding of the "laws of harmonious proportions" used by the Universal Architect in the creation of the cosmos. He therefore obsessively studies every ancient treatise on architecture he can find in an attempt to master the principles governing the construction of the pyramids and of megalithic circles such as Stonehenge, for he is convinced that these ancient buildings were built on the same principles that rule the creation of the cosmos. As we have seen, he builds his seven churches according to these principles and arranges them in a pattern that imitates that of the Pleiades. He then disappears in the interior of Little St. Hugh, like Hermes Trismegistus had done in his mythical pyramid (205), in order to negotiate his essential transformation, or, in his own words, his "approaching Change" (206).

In gnostic and occultist theory transmigration from body to body is necessary unless in one life the adept can do "all those things which we dare not either speak or hear of, nay which we must not even conceive in our thoughts" (St. Irenaeus, 1884: 25). Since Dyer's disappearance in the crypt of Little St. Hugh in 1715 until Detective Hawksmoor enters the church, Dyer has undergone a series of split or doppelgänger reincarnations both as victim and as murderer: each time he is reborn as a child or tramp, the new reincarnation is subsequently murdered by his "shadow" or dark emanation. In his last, twentieth-century reincarnation, Dyer's evil or shadow facet is embodied by the tramp called "The Architect," his good or rational side, by Nicholas Hawksmoor. So, after finishing the talismanic pattern of the churches, all that remains to be done is to reconcile these two opposed and split potentialities, the "light" and the "shadow," Dyer's divine and satanic emanations or, in Jungian terms (1980), his split ego's conscious and unconscious facets, which must be brought into harmony in order for Dyer to achieve the godlike totality of the Self.

The novel closes with the meeting of the "The Architect" and the detective in Little St. Hugh. As they come face to face in the darkness of the church, the two fuse into each other, forming a unity in the shadow their two figures cast upon the stone. Then, they speak "with one voice" (217). The text itself echoes their reunification: what they say is physically separated by a wide blank on the page, indicating a metalepsis, or change of narrative level. From the narrative point of

view, then, the duality expressed in the alternation of narrative voices in the successive chapters is finally merged in a first-person narration uttered by somebody who is neither "The Architect" nor Hawksmoor.

Who is this narrator, who contemplates "The Architect" and Hawksmoor as they move backward and forward in the eternal *danse macabre* of the dead, forming a circle around him? At the archetypal and mythical level there is no doubt that the one who speaks can only be Dyer's reunified Self, the cosmic man, the summation of "The Architect" and Hawksmoor, ascending at last to the sphere of the stars "on a winding path of smooth stones" (217), with the split, inferior selves remaining behind like the discarded fleshly garments in Plato's theory, as the last sentence of the first paragraph suggests: "And when *I looked back*, they were watching one another silently" (217, my emphasis). But even if we believe Hawksmoor and "The Architect" to be posterior reincarnations of Dyer, his black and white emanations, or, in Jungian terms, the split facets of Dyer's fragmented self, we still do not know what the means are by which the twentieth-century detective manages to direct his steps to the transcendental meeting place where "The Architect" is waiting for him. The answer is that he finds it, like the reader of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, by rightly interpreting Dyer's book.

At one point in his investigations, detective Hawksmoor receives a strange old book with white covers and the remains of sealing wax on it that contains complex designs and puzzling explanations about the building of churches. This book is Dyer's secret diary, in which he has carefully annotated the laws of harmonious proportions that rule the building of the pyramids, of obelisks, and of megalithic circles, as well as of his churches. The day Dyer decided to destroy this book, it disappeared from his locked trunk only to reappear mysteriously in the hands of a tramp who tore it to pieces before it was anonymously sent to Hawksmoor. The detective also tore out several pages of the book to stick on the wall, in order to have the designs of the churches constantly in view. He studied these labyrinthine designs and suddenly realized that the connecting link between the churches was Nicholas Dyer, the architect who had built them two centuries before. Then he starts searching for a tramp nicknamed "The Architect" and feels the impulse to go to Little St. Hugh.

In accordance with medieval doctrine, Dyer has explicitly compared architectural design to book-writing. We may say, therefore, that Dyer's analogical activity is twofold: he has tried to recreate the (fiendish) Creator's cosmic plan in the geometrical figure cast by his churches

and also in the writing of his mysterious book, which may well be the book that we have in our hands. This confers a strange transcendental quality to our own act of reading, for, if Dyer, like Dante, may achieve his transcendental transformation by the sheer act of writing himself into his book, the reader capable of truly interpreting it may also achieve his or her own essential transformation, as the reader of the *Divine Comedy* does, by analogically interpreting the book as the verbal construction reproducing Dyer's cosmogonic pattern. We also realize that the distribution of the novel into twelve chapters hides a profound analogical meaning for, like the twelve days of Epiphany and the twelve months of the year, the twelve chapters prefigure a whole cosmogonic cycle whose beginning is clearly marked by the apocalyptic Great Fire with which the novel starts. In this sense, the fact that Little St. Hugh is not a real Hawksmoor church but rather the fictitious creation of Peter Ackroyd acquires a new significance, for it only exists within the cardboard boundaries of Ackroyd's fictional cosmos. Thus, the novel suddenly reveals its condition both of Borgesian Library of Babel (or self-begetting and autonomous Labyrinth of Paper and Ink) and of transcendental Jacob's ladder (or cabbalistic ladder of the Sephirot), casting the reader upward into eternity. From this double, paradoxical perspective, the puzzling contradiction existing between Iain Sinclair's remark (and Spenser Spender's in *The Great Fire of London*) that the Hawksmoor churches form a "pentacle star" while Dyer insists that he has constructed a "septilateral figure" is also explained, for the missing pyramidal angle exists on a third, transcendental dimension, that of Plato's (and F. H. Bradley's) sublime and absolute Logos, but also in Borges's (and Oscar Wilde's) equally atemporal and absolute but fictional and linguistic World of Art.

After this tantalizing realization, the reader, carried by the rationalist inertia of historical linearity, can close the book or, enticed by the suggestivity of mythical circularity, can choose to go back to the beginning again. If he or she decides to read again the "Fictional Preface by the Author" (in Dyer's terms), he or she will find the external narrator presenting Dyer at work in his study, using "a small knife with a piece of frayed rope wrapped around its ivory handle . . . a short brass rule, his pair of compasses and the thick paper he used for his draughts," enveloped in the lights and shadows cast by the fire that burns in the room.

Although rule, compass, and carving knife may seem perfectly normal utensils for the construction of the wooden models of churches, these are also tools used in magic, the rule and compass evoking the magician's astrological and numerological calculations, and the sacrifi-

cial knife with "a piece of frayed rope" knotted to it evoking the rope knot, used in imitative magic as a powerful device for murdering at a distance, without touching the victim. In other words, Dyer is presented as architect/magus, that is, not as a copyist or imitator, but rather as *cosmocrator*, or artificer of the original plans and the wooden models of the churches that the masons have to reproduce in stone "at the other side of the great city." By placing Dyer in the position of original architect to be imitated by the stonemasons, the preface suggests a structure of *mise en abyme* that simultaneously affirms and denies the transcendental ending of the novel, for if Dyer is the first artificer, then he is the very Satan that created the world, and there is abundant evidence in the novel to support this identification. On the other hand, the fact that Dyer is presented by an external narrator caught in a compressed span of time that runs from 1711 to our twentieth-century present moment, still at work in the construction of his models, reduces his status to that of a literary figure forever trapped within the cardboard covers of the novel, the impotent victim of Peter Ackroyd's god-like creative whim. Thus, in accordance with the duality of myth and also in keeping with the contradictory nature of postmodernism, the novel simultaneously suggests and undermines the possibility of transcendence, forcing us again to return to the final paragraph of the novel, where we find Dyer/Hawksmoor (like Oscar Wilde at the end of *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde*) left "begging on the threshold of eternity" (217), that is, unsure of whether the door of paradise will ever open to let him in. Consequently, this is also the paradoxical situation in which the reader of Peter Ackroyd's *Hawksmoor* is left.

The year 1987 marked the publication of *The Diversions of Purley* and *Chatterton*, an apposite chronological coincidence for, apart from being shortlisted for the Booker Prize and, according to Brian Finney, the novel that "a number or reviewers consider to be his best novel to date" (1992: 241), *Chatterton* is also Ackroyd's most "metafictional" historiographic metafiction,[8] a novel that shares with the poetry collection the same deep concerns with the linguistic nature of writing, the Derridean slippage of meaning and the troubled relationship of the individual writer with the literary tradition in which he or she is inscribed.

At the same time, *Chatterton* may be said to stand in a complex relationship to Ackroyd's earlier novels: like *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde*, *Chatterton* develops around the figure of not just a key poet in

[8] Cf. Susana González Ábalos, 1996, on the metafictional element in *Chatterton*.

the history of English literature, but of the poet to whom Oscar Wilde devoted his last lecture in March 1888 (Donoghue, 1988: 1). Where *Hawksmoor* combines two different historical periods, *Chatterton* combines three: the first is that of Thomas Chatterton's own brief life span (1752–1770); the second is set around the year 1856, when Henry Wallis completed his Pre-Raphaelite portrait of a dead Chatterton lying in his romanticized poet's garret, with the poet George Meredith posing as a model, just before his wife Mary Ellen left him for Wallis. The third is located in the twentieth century and centers on the discovery by another poet, Charles Wychwood, of a second portrait, in this case, of an implausibly mature Chatterton, who might, therefore, have survived his official death at the age of seventeen.

Whereas *The Great Fire of London* begins with a summary of the first part of *Little Dorrit*, *Chatterton* opens with a summary of Chatterton's life that looks like an encyclopaedia entry and is followed by four textual extracts. These excerpts can easily be identified as slightly edited versions of episodes that appear later on in the novel. The first excerpt presents Chatterton in a scene that recalls the presentation of Nicholas Dyer in what Dyer himself would call the "Preface or Advertisement," first holding a book in his hand (1988a: 5) and talking with a girl, and then gazing at the tower of St. Mary Redcliffe in Bristol and muttering the words of a poem that prefigures his impending death — in words that bring to mind Dyer's vision of "some one from the dark Mazes of an unknown Futurity," coming to find him (1998a: 205) — and points to one of the basic topoi of the novel: the question of whether writers live forever in the work of others:

> The time of my departure is approaching.
> Nigh is the hurricane that will scatter my leaves.
> Tomorrow, perhaps, the wanderer will appear —
> His eyes will search for me round every spot,
> And will, — and will not find me. (Ackroyd, 1988b: 2).

The second excerpt, reproducing a fragment of the conversation between George Meredith and Henry Wallis (133, 138), encapsulates the second topos around which the novel develops: the question of reality/unreality and of the truthfulness or falsehood of art. Although Meredith is "pretending to be someone else" (2), when the portrait is finished, who will be in the picture? "Will it be Meredith or will it be Chatterton?" (3). Meredith answers this question when he tells Wallis: "'The poet does not merely recreate or describe the world. He actually creates it. And that is why he is feared . . . . And that is why,' he added

quietly, 'this [the portrait] will always be remembered as the true death of Chatterton'" (157). The third fragment is from a conversation between the novelist Harriet Scrope and her friend, the art critic Sarah Tilt (34–35). In the fragment, Harriet characteristically misquotes the Chorus's Epilogue in Marlowe's *Dr. Faustus* and Sarah corrects her, but instead of admitting her mistake, the novelist retorts with another misquotation, in this case, the last two lines in stanza seven of Wordsworth's "Resolution and Independence" (1807), in which the Romantic poet calls Chatterton "the marvellous Boy" (Gill and Wu, eds., 1994: 127). The topos thus introduced in this fragment is that of plagiarism and the question of originality and indebtedness. The fourth excerpt refers to the end of chapter 4 (47), when, feeling terribly sick and depressed, Charles Wychwood sits beside a fountain and, in a scene linked to the poem in the first excerpt, meets the ghost of Thomas Chatterton: "He watched the leaves falling to the ground . . . . Then the pain returned and it was only later that he noticed how the leaves had been swept away, the noises stopped" (47). That is, the fourth excerpt anticipates Charles's climactic encounter with Chatterton and the end of his "wanderer's quest" for illumination.

Structurally, the excerpts prefigure the historical strata that interact in the novel, which seems to have been built following Yeats's notion of historical time as unfolding in one-hundred-year loops or "gyres." The novel combines an eighteenth-, a nineteenth-, and a twentieth-century story presented, as in *The Great Fire of London* and *Hawksmoor*, as forming part of a cyclical space-time continuum that constantly feeds on itself and simultaneously moves both forward and backward, so that the protagonists of each story, the visionary poets Thomas Chatterton, George Meredith, and Charles Wychwood, can easily cross their respective historical boundaries and interact with each other.

Like the Victorian "three decker," *Chatterton* is divided into three parts and is narrated by an omniscient and ubiquitous narrator who, also in keeping with the conventions of nineteenth-century multiplot fiction, weaves into an intricate pattern of relationships a plethora of characters whose lives are in one way or another related to literature or art in general, and to Chatterton in particular, even though they belong to three different historical periods. However, the effect thus produced of transhistorical connectedness is simultaneously undermined by the use of different voices and styles that produce a Bakhtinian effect of *heteroglossia*, or multiplicity of voices struggling for preeminence in the all-encompassing textual universe. For example, Chatterton speaks in a late-eighteenth-century pastiche that sometimes comes close to Nicholas Dyer's style, while some of the twentieth-century secondary characters speak and behave in what can be described as a stylized and broadly parodic Dickensian style evincing the influence of the music hall.

In the same way that "everything [in Wallis's portrait] moved towards the centre, towards Thomas Chatterton" (164), the double epigraphs that precede the three parts of the novel, taken from Chatterton's poems, point to his centrality. But the five chapters in the first part are also undercut by a series of fragmentary phrases and sentences in italics that are gathered together at the end of each chapter, producing an interesting effect of connectedness-within-fragmentation similar to that of Pound's *Cantos*. Put together, these apparently meaningless fragments may be said to reproduce the whole novel *en abyme*, as they synthesize the main stages of what may be described as Charles's process of maturation as a visionary poet. The fragments in chapter 1: "*Oh yes*" (13); "*if it is real*" (17); "*this is him*" (21), synthesize Charles's elated discovery that Chatterton had not died at the age of seventeen: "'Oh yes!' said Charles at last, 'if this [portrait] is real, this is him [Chatterton]'" (23). The fragments in chapter 2, "*whereof we cannot speak*" (28), "*thereof we must be silent*" (30), taken from Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, point to Chatterton's basic insight: the radical autonomy of language. The fragments in chapter 3 anticipate Chatterton's offer to Charles to cross the threshold from the world of common day to the atemporal world of literature: "He had come through his illness . . . and in his relief he no longer cared whether the young man had been real or unreal: "'I was sick once,' he said, 'but I'm better now.' Then he walked through the gate" (47). The fragments in chapter 4 (53, 56), taken from William Blake, the greatest visionary poet in English, confirms the reader's expectations that Charles has crossed the threshold and has himself become a visionary: "Craving & devouring; but my eyes are always upon thee, O lovely Delusion" (60); while those in chapter 5 (62, 68 and 73) foretell the merging of Chatterton and Charles's voices in the atemporal world of literature: "'The dream unfolds,' he said. 'The sleeper awakes, but still the dream goes on.' And he realized at once that these were not his words, but those of someone other" (78).

The other two parts reproduce *in extenso* the stages synthesized in Part One, in what can be described as a wider concentric loop of the same story. But this second, extended version is itself constantly undercut and reflected by the parallel stories of George Meredith's relationship to Chatterton; of Henry Wallis's painting of his portrait; of Wallis's illicit relationship with Meredith's wife; of the realist novelist and biog-

rapher Edward Tilt's writing of the biography of George Meredith; of the bookseller Joynson's writing of the "false" Chatterton's memoirs, of Charles Wychwood's own writing of the "true" memoirs of Chatterton and so on, *ad infinitum*, so that eventually the reader is forced to impose his or her own arbitrary pattern of meanings on a text that constantly aspires to the category of "pure writing," the *pure écriture* of Roland Barthes.

At the beginning of the novel, we see Charles Wychwood following the promptings of an odd "small sign beside a blue door" that reads: "'Leno Antiques'. Don't Linger. Make Us Very Happy. Walk Up. Do" (8). Entering the shop, Charles finds himself transported from the world of common day to the fantastic world of a parodic Dickensian "Old Curiosity Shop," which contains, among bric-à-brac and curiosa, an early nineteenth-century "Portrait of an Unknown Man" (43). The eyes of the Unknown Man attract Charles's attention to such a point that he exchanges it for the two-volume *The Lost Art of Eighteenth-Century Flute-Playing* by James Macpherson (9)[9] he had taken to the antique shop to sell. Charles had interrupted a heated discussion between Mr. Leno and his wife. Ackroyd describes the hysterical and odd couple as Dickens would have done: first, by pointing out one outstanding physical trait: Mr. Leno's "bright purple birthmark splayed across his right cheek" (8) and Mrs. Leno's crippled condition (9), reminiscent of that of Arthur's mother in *Little Dorrit*; second, by concentrating on the oddity of their speech and behavior. For example, after perusing the volumes on flute-playing, Mrs. Leno, whose condition of literary character is enhanced by her name: "Sybil Poetry Leno" (10), asks Charles whether he is a flautist in the following "poetic" terms: "Are you of a wandering nature? With your bird nest hair and your peach-fuzz moustache, are you a banditto of a minstrel kind? Where is your lovely instrument?" (9), while Mr. Leno expresses an animosity for children that betrays his own childish character: when, on a second visit to the antique shop, Charles brings his son, Edward, with him, Mr. Leno "stuck out his tongue at the boy, who indignantly returned the gesture" (43).

[9] James Macpherson (1736–1796) is another famous eighteenth-century faker and plagiarist. His *Ossian* poems, presented as the faithful translation from the Gaelic of an ancient epic by Ossian, the son of Finn, were praised by Schiller and Goethe and gave the Scottish poet an immense popularity, even after being exposed as a plagiarist by Dr. Johnson.

Indeed, besides their undeniable Dickensian parentage, their grotesque behavior also betrays their condition of "Punch and Judy" and of music-hall characters, with the name "Leno" signalling them as direct descendants of Dan Leno, the great pantomime dame, comic, and music-hall star, known as "the funniest man on earth," who died in London on the last day of October 1904 (Ackroyd, 1993a). For Ackroyd, Dan Leno, to whom he will devote his eighth novel, *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem*, epitomizes "the particular London sensibility that derives its energy from variety, from spectacle, and from display . . . a sensibility in which pathos and comedy, high tragedy and low farce, are effortlessly combined." As he further explains, Dan Leno, like the eighteenth-century comedian Samuel Foote and his early nineteenth-century successor Charles Mathews are the most charismatic representatives of the centuries-old London tradition of the "monopolylinguist . . . in other words, comedians or actors who play a number of quick-change parts in the course of one performance." Ackroyd stresses the influence of these popular London comedians on writers who were their contemporaries. He explains how Samuel Foote's comic routine *Tea At The Haymarket* affected writers as diverse as Samuel Johnson and William Blake, and how Charles Mathews made a lasting impression on Charles Dickens:

> In 1831 he had seen Mathews play Miss Mildew, a lady dressed entirely in white, and he never forgot it . . . she re-emerged, as Miss Havisham, many years later. And the successor of Mathews was of course Leno himself, whom Dickens also met and admired.

Another interesting relationship Ackroyd suggests is that of "John Sessions or Jack Dee, who may or may not be related to the great Doctor Dee." Now, if we accept Ackroyd's contention that Charles Mathews and Dan Leno decisively influenced Dickens's construction of his characters, we can conclude that the Lenos in *Chatterton* — like Spenser Spender in *The Great Fire of London* — are two living palimpsests of accumulated echoes, embodying the essence of a concrete London sensibility, that of the music hall comedian or monopolylinguist.

But the Lenos are only two of the many grotesque characters that populate the novel. The music-hall tradition of transvestism and drag is literally embodied in the squalid and affectedly feminine old gay named Pat who wears "a leopard-skin leotard with the top of *a red track-suit hanging over it*," (50, my emphasis), and who receives Charles in Bristol in a Georgian house on whose railings has been written by hand: "Beware of the Bitch. She Bites" (50). Equally grotesque is his dwarfish

friend, Mr. Joynson, "an elderly man wearing a green silk smoking jacket and very narrow black trousers [whose] hair was piled up and coifed: it looked like a piece of wood which had been clumsily nailed to his head" (218). Mr. Joynson, who presents himself as the descendant of Thomas Chatterton's bookseller, is the owner of the portrait Charles finds at Leno Antiques and also of the Chatterton documents that corroborate the version of Chatterton's survival until old age.

But the most accomplished example of Dickensian-*cum*-music-hall character is Harriet Scrope, Charles's ex-employer and a former bestselling novelist, who is currently attempting to write her autobiography as a way to come to terms with her writer's block. Harriet Scrope is an opinionated and hilarious figure who betrays her plagiaristic proclivities in her speech, practically made up of misquotations from earlier writers in the English canon. Clothed in an old-fashioned fur coat and an absurd hat topped with a stuffed budgerigar, she has the striking inborn capacity of the London monopolylinguist to assume different roles and voices and to mimic other characters, just for the fun of it. Indeed, she is Ackroyd's version of Dickens's Miss Havisham, through cross-bred with Dan Leno's Mother Goose and Punch's Judy: she calls the librarian Philip Slack "Pip" (148); constantly refers to herself as "Mother" when she talks to her cat, Mr. Gaskell; she sticks her tongue out at Edward — like Mr. Leno — when the grown ups' backs are turned (182); and, surprised by the unexpected appearance of Charles, she shrieks: "I thought . . . that you were Mr. Punch come to get me" (38).

Realism-biased reviewers of *Chatterton* usually resent the overt fictionality not only of grotesque characters such as these, but even of more psychologically developed characters, such as the librarian Philip Slack. Thus, for example, Michael Neve complains that: "Ackroyd himself is so intensely caught up in the baroque world of representation and misrepresentation that it is hard to take Philip as a serious character: he is the dutiful heterosexual in the twilight world of exotic homosexualism that is Ackroyd's main theme" (1988, 54).

Neve misses the whole point, not only because the main theme of *Chatterton* emphatically is *not* "the twilight world of exotic homosexualism," but, more importantly, because Ackroyd's construction of characters is not aimed at creating realistic fictional versions of "real" people, but rather overtly fictional characters such as Harriet Scrope, who is perfectly aware of her own fictionality and cherishes it, although this realization does not mean that she considers herself unreal: "'You think I'm grotesque, don't you? But I'm not. I'm all too real. I might even bite.' She opened her mouth wide and, to Philip's astonishment, let her false teeth protrude for an instant before sucking them back in" (Ackroyd, 1988b: 227). The further implication is that if Harriet Scrope is "real," so is the textual world in which she lives. Indeed, in the world of *Chatterton*, the unreality of fiction and the reality of the material world are constantly denied: Harriet's cat snatches and eats the fake bird on her hat, believing it to be real (118), and Harriet's definition of reality is "the invention of unimaginative people" (39). In other words, Harriet Scrope and the other overtly fictional characters exist as such in order to demonstrate the validity of Chatterton's — and Blake's — contention, expressed by Meredith, that: "There is nothing more real than words. They are reality" (157).

This is the lesson Charles Wychwood and his friend Philip Slack will learn through their relationship with Chatterton. At the end of *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde*, the dying Wilde recalls the portrait of a prince he had seen at the Louvre and he wishes he could "return to that past to enter another man's heart" (Ackroyd, 1984: 181). Likewise, Charles Wychwood, confronted with the Portrait of an Unknown Man that he believes to be Chatterton in middle-life, still living and writing poetry in the various styles of his contemporaries many years after his official death, becomes emotionally involved with the eighteenth-century poet remembered by posterity as the greatest plagiarist in history and obsessively tries to establish the truth of his discovery, with the result that his received assumptions about authorial originality are totally disrupted, for, as he reflects, if his theory were true, then "half of the poetry of the eighteenth century is probably written by him" (Ackroyd, 1988b: 94).

Charles is an unpublished poet who is suffering from writer's block and also from the effects of a brain tumor that gives him terrible headaches and also hallucinations in which he sees himself split in two: "He dared not comb his hair because it was not his own" (46). Absent-minded, frugal, and boyish, he cares nothing for material comfort, is always daydreaming about various ways in which he might fulfil his potentialities — for example, as a revivalist eighteenth-century flute player and, currently, as the writer of what he calls the "memoirs or confession" (208) of Thomas Chatterton — while the family lives on the wages earned by his wife, Vivien, in a tiny apartment still decorated with the furniture and posters from his University days at Cambridge. He is, however, a wonderful father, who loves telling stories to his little son, Edward, whose name he always adorns with medieval epithets — Edward the Impossible, Edward the Unexpected (13), and so on — in a way that recalls Chatterton's invention of faked medieval verse. He

has no doubts about the importance of the slim poetry collection he has produced so far and, although he believes (with the young Ackroyd) that "Fiction is a very debased form" (70) while "Poetry is the finer art" (149), he literally feeds on fiction: during the trip to Bristol he keeps eating little rolls of paper torn from his copy of *Great Expectations* (Ackroyd, 1988b: 48–49).

Charles's best friend, Philip Slack, works in a public library frequented by people as desperately lonely and shy as himself. They are the same kind of people that we have already seen lurking in the narrow lanes of London in *The Great Fire of London*, *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde*, and *Hawksmoor:* a vagrant talking to himself; a middle-aged woman with tangled hair, kneeling on the floor and moaning over two books open in front of her; and a young man with bright red hair (like the tramp that helped Audrey Skelton start the Great Fire in *The Great Fire of London*; like the tramp named "The Architect" in *Hawksmoor*; and also like Thomas Chatterton, George Meredith, and his wife, Mary Ellen), invariably staring down at an unopened book (71–72). Indeed, in this version of atemporal London, Philip's public library is the mythical center of power toward which the alienated and mad invariably converge, bringing to mind Iain Sinclair's reminder that, like the Hawksmoor churches, "The British Library & Greenwich Observatory [are] two major sources of occult power" (1975: 5). A debased equivalent of this cultural center of power is Cumberland and Maitland's Art Gallery, where Charles's wife works as a secretary.

Philip Slack suffers from what can be described as a bad case of Bloomian anxiety of influence. He had once attempted to write a novel, but he had abandoned it after some forty pages: not only because of the sheer difficulty of writing but because the few pages he had written

> seemed to him to be filled with images and phrases from the work of other writers whom he admired. It had become a patchwork of other voices and other styles, and it was the overwhelming difficulty of recognizing his own voice among them that had led him to abandon the project. (70).

Philip's paralyzing realization that he cannot recognize his own voice in his writing evinces his humanist bias for authorial autonomy and originality. In "Tradition and the Individual Talent," T. S. Eliot famously said that it is absurd to try and find the traits of originality of a given artist regardless of the tradition he stems from, for, very often, the best parts of his work are those in which the influence of the dead masters is most clearly revealed: "No poet, no artist of any art has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation, is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets, the dead artists" (1979: 2294). Still, we should not forget that Eliot's remarks were aimed at attenuating the importance attributed by the romantics and the symbolists to individual authorship and to the individual work of art, which they conceived as a unitary and perfectly autonomous whole, with a harmonious and coherent internal structure unrelated in principle to other works of art. This definition of author and work, defended in the critical field by the New Criticism and by extreme Formalism (or, in Ackroyd's terms, by aesthetic humanism), is implicitly endorsed by Harold Bloom (1975), who describes the anxiety of influence as the pressure exerted on the talented young poet by the texts of a dominant predecessor. Bloom conceives the anxiety of influence in Oedipal terms as a heroic (i.e. romantic) struggle for affirmation of original authorship that involves a Freudian process of maturation. As I point out elsewhere (Onega, 1995: 94), this critical position stands in sharp opposition to the theory of intertextuality as developed by Bakhtin, Kristeva, and Barthes. For these critics (that is, for Ackroyd's modernists), the most important notion is not so much the fact that an individual writer might struggle to achieve authorial autonomy and originality against one or several dominant predecessors, but rather the fact that the subject, defined as author or reader, exists as such and gives meaning to his vital experience and constructs his life in close relationship to the text. From this perspective, the text, not the author or reader, becomes the only available reality and the source and origin of writer and reader alike. Harriet Scrope expresses this idea in words that bring to mind T. S. Eliot's contention in his thesis on F. H. Bradley that the fate of all interpretations is to be interpreted again: "The real world is just a succession of interpretations. Everything which is written down immediately becomes a kind of fiction" (Ackroyd, 1988b: 40).

The discovery of the (fake) Chatterton portrait and also of the Bristol papers supposedly written by the mature Chatterton (but in fact written by his publisher, Joynson, out of revengeful spite), will signify the end of Charles Wychwood's and Philip Slack's bias for authorial originality and closure and their liberation from the anxiety of influence. Reading the (ironically false) newly found papers in which Chatterton defends creative plagiarism and confesses that he was the real author of works attributed to "Mr Gray, Mr Akenside, Mr Churchill, Mr Collins and sundry others. I even coppied Mr Blake, for my own love of his Gothick style" (92), Charles experiences an illumination, the cathartic realization that "our whole understanding of eighteenth-

century poetry will have to be revised" (127). Once his belief in authorial originality is shattered, he starts noticing that even the different biographies of Chatterton contain striking discrepancies: "each biography described a quite different poet: even the simplest observation by one was contradicted by another, so that nothing seemed certain" (127). As the narrator points out, Charles had initially "been annoyed by these discrepancies but then he was exhilarated by them: for it meant that anything became possible. If there were no truths, everything was true" (127). This realization amounts to a fulcrum that frees Charles's imagination and makes him feel capable of writing his own, apparently equally spurious, version of Chatterton's memoirs. But we can never be totally sure about the falsity of Charles's version of Chatterton's life, for he writes it in a frenzied state, comparable to a visionary fit of automatic writing, or to the opium-induced reverie during which Coleridge wrote "Kubla Khan": he goes on writing furiously after he has run out of ink, filling page after page of invisible writing with, conceivably, words dictated by Chatterton: "All at once he saw the entire pattern of Chatterton's life, and with redoubled pressure he wrote it down with his empty pen" (127). Charles stops writing just before the telephone rings, in clear parody of the fatal interruption of Coleridge's creative activity by the unexpected entrance of a visitor from Porlock.

Carried by the force of Charles's argumentation, Philip Slack will undergo a similar cathartic liberation from his romantic attachment to the myth of origins. After Charles's death, he realizes that "there is no real origin for anything. Everything just exists. Everything just exists in order to exist" (232). This realization signifies the end of his writer's block: "'So I tried writing my own novel but it didn't work, you know. I kept on imitating other people. I had no real story, either, but now' — he hesitated — 'but now, with this — with Charles's theory — I might be able to —'" (232). Slack's liberation from his writer's block gives an unexpected metafictional or self-begetting twist to the novel, opening up the possibility that Slack might have picked up Charles's story as the subject of his novel and thus that he might be the fictional author of *Chatterton*.

Before reaching this understanding, Philip had been shocked by the accidental discovery of what he considered to be a shameful act of plagiarism on the part of Harriet Scrope. Surveying "the stacks," the basement of the library in which he works, where all the forgotten or neglected volumes were deposited (68), Philip found a long-forgotten novel written by the nineteenth-century novelist, Harrison Bentley, entitled *The Last Testament*. Perusing the novel, he is struck by the realization that Harriet Scrope had used the same plot in her novel *Stage Fire* (68–69). In what could be described as a clear case of poetic justice, Bentley's novel deals with the question of original authorship: "the biographer of a certain poet, throughout referred to as K—, discovers that his subject, at the end of his life, had been too ill to compose the verses which had brought him eternal fame; that, in fact, it had been the poet's wife who had written them for him" (69).

The false attribution to K— of the poems written by his devoted wife decisively contributed to establishing the poet's posthumous fame in the same way Thomas Chatterton's recreation of medieval poetry established that of his fictional *alter ego*: the medieval blind monk and bard, Thomas Rowley. But Chatterton's own fame rested on the Romantic poets' misinterpretation and appropriation in their poetry of his untimely death as well as on Henry Wallis's equally fanciful representation of him in his portrait. Bentley's story itself has a ring of *déjà vu* about it, for it echoes the "real" story of Harriet Scrope's favorite contemporary painter, Seymour, whose last (and best) pictures were painted by his assistant, Stewart Merk (111–14), to say nothing of the striking resemblance between Harriet Scrope's title, *Stage Fire*, and Ackroyd's *The Great Fire of London* and between Harrison Bentley's title, *The Last Testament*, and Peter Ackroyd's *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde*; or again, between *Mean Time*, the title of the novel written by Andrew Flint, Charles's friend at university and the biographer of Meredith, and Dickens's *Hard Times*; or between the name of Kafka's protagonist in *The Castle*, Joseph K., and that of Bentley's protagonist, or even of Harrison Bentley and William Bentley, Galvanauska's disciple in Charles Palliser's *Betrayals* (1994), a novel that shares interesting traits in common with *Chatterton*.[10] Indeed, in the world of *Chatterton* the intertextual game of cross-references and literary appropriations can be spread *ad infinitum*, making good Chatterton's contention that, in Charles's words: "the entire material and spiritual worlds [can be explained] in terms of imitation and forgery" (126). This vision of the world is shared by the mad painter Grandma Joel, a visionary secondary

[10] The whole novel is a study in plagiarism and (literary) betrayal. In Chapter 8, "A Nice Touch," a famous writer of whodunits, a jealous would-be writer, and Charles Palliser himself get entangled in a complex game of appropriations, evident from the similarity of the plots and titles of their novels, that is strongly reminiscent of Harriet Scrope's and Harrison Bentley's appropriation of Ackroyd's plots and titles. Cf. Onega, 1997b.

character whose role of oracle is similar to that of the Bedlam "Demoniack" in *Hawksmoor*: "she wanted to explain the entire material and spiritual world in terms of imitation" (109–10).

In yet another case of puzzling coincidence, Philip finds leaning against Bentley's novel a volume edited by the Dowager Lady Moynihan (70), illustrated by a series of engraved plates. Among them Philip notices "one scene which was familiar, and, when he looked down at the legend beneath the engraving, he read 'Chatterton's Monument in Bristol Churchyard'" (70). The accompanying text explains how George Meredith "in the early months of 1856, in the utmost extremity, and with thoughts of self murder" (70), after his wife Mary Ellen left him for Henry Wallis, was "saved for literature by the intervention of the ghostly Thomas Chatterton" (70–71). Closing his eyes, Philip tries to imagine the romantic scene, only, however, to find himself picturing in his mind's eye a totally unromantic and apparently unrelated vision: "Harriet Scrope and behind her, his face in shadow, was Harrison Bentley" (71). Philip's puzzling vision brings to mind the episode in the "Scylla and Charybdis" chapter in *Ulysses*, in which the reflection of Stephen's face mysteriously fuses with Bloom's in a mirror, resulting in the features of Shakespeare. Both visions convey a similar message: that literature is a huge transhistorical palimpsest and that, in Charles Wychwood's words, the greatest plagiarist in history is "the greatest poet in history" (94). Unable to understand this message, Philip opens his eyes and is overwhelmed by the sheer bulk of books in the library: "it was with an unexpected fearfulness that he saw how the books stretched away into the darkness" (71). Indeed, at this stage, Philip is panic-stricken by the vision of an all-encompassing linguistic universe: "if you crossed the threshold into that world, you would be surrounded by words; you would crush them beneath your feet, you would knock against them with your head and arms, but if you tried to grasp them they would melt away. Philip did not dare to turn his back upon these books. Not yet" (71).

We can say that Philip stands in the position of Harold Bloom's post-romantic and post-symbolist (Ackroyd's humanist) poet, struggling to make his individual voice heard against the voices of his strong predecessors. The cause of his writer's block is very different from that of Harriet Scrope. Harriet does not believe in original authorship. On the contrary, she is convinced that everything is made up (28) and is not ashamed to ask first her secretary Mary Wilson and then Charles Wychwood to write her autobiography for her and, what is more, to invent episodes from her past life that might improve the book, like

that of her friendship with T. S. Eliot: "Why don't you [Mary Wilson] link dear Tom with those bits about Fitzrovia? . . . . I can't think of everything" (27). The only reason why she has stopped writing is that she has run out of ideas and is afraid of being exposed as a plagiarist if she uses somebody else's work again. Indeed, Harriet Scrope is totally unaware of what we can call the metaphysical implications behind her acts of borrowing. In this sense, Harriet's apparently gratuitous confession to the blind passer-by that: "You know I wos goin' blind once. I'ad cataracts" (29–30) becomes pointedly ironic, for as Sarah Tilt observes, "Seeing is believing" (116), and although she knows that "You do get blind poets, don't you?" (32), Harriet is totally unaware that, by making Thomas Rowley physically blind, Chatterton was suggesting that he had the spiritual or visionary insight she herself lacks. As the mad painter Grandma Joel acutely notes: "The blind are fathers to the blind" (110).

Again, Harriet's spiritual blindness is symbolized by her incapacity to see anything beyond her physical reflection each time she looks at herself in the mirror: "Harriet Scrope was trying to examine her gums in the ormulu mirror above the mantelpiece; she was craning her neck and leering at her reflection, almost toppling over as she did so, but she could see nothing" (96). The ormulu mirror, like the one at the back of J. Van Eyck's famous portrait of "Arnolfini and his Wife" (1434) that reflects the whole scene *en abyme*, is an apposite example of the palimpsest, or shield-within-the-shield effect in heraldry. Harriet's ormulu mirror functions as an index of the various portraits that appear in the novel, whose condition of transhistorical palimpsests is only evident to visionary characters such as Charles Wychwood.

When Charles finds the early nineteenth-century portrait of Chatterton in Leno Antiques, he is fascinated by the eyes of the Unknown Man in the picture. After his death, the portrait is taken to Cumberland and Maitland's art gallery. Cumberland immediately notices an incongruence between the legend: "*Pinxit George Stead. 1802*" and "the piece of furniture from the 1830s," and he traces "the faint outline of another face beyond the painted mouth" (200), but his only conclusion is that the painting is a fake. Likewise, when Stewart Merk, the expert Seymour faker, is asked to "improve" it, he realizes that the painting "contained the residue of several different images, painted at various times" (205), and, prompted by the (humanist) need to reveal the original figure, tries to remove the successive layers of paint, with the result that the whole portrait melts — as we have seen, the effect Philip feared would happen to the words, if he tried to seize them

(71) — but not before revealing a whole gallery of faces in a way that recalls the effect produced by the picture of Dorian Gray: "The face of the sitter dissolved, becoming two faces, one old and one young: as the paint decayed before Merk's eyes . . . these two faces recurred in a series of smaller and smaller images until after a few moments they had entirely disappeared" (228).

Thus, the fake Chatterton portrait reveals Chatterton's true face, one made up of the combined faces of the strong poets of the past whose identity he has helped to create in the same way they have helped to create him, thus revealing its condition of transhistorical palimpsest. This is the secret Charles had read in the eyes of the Unknown Man and also the vision he had on his first visit to the Tate Gallery, when, looking at the Wallis portrait of Meredith posing as Chatterton, he sees himself assuming Chatterton's recumbent posture — "Charles was lying there" (132) — while Mrs. Angell (Chatterton's landlady) becomes his wife Vivien's "shadow" overlooking the scene from the foot of the bed (132). A similar vision is granted to Vivien herself, who, unexpectedly coming across the portrait of the Unknown Man in the art gallery where she works, faints upon the floor (205), surely with the shock of recognizing her dead husband's face in that of the Unknown Man. Likewise, when, after Charles's death, his son Edward goes to the Tate Gallery a second time to contemplate Wallis's portrait, he is astonished to find "his father lying there" (229).

From a Bloomian perspective, we could say that the message these visions convey is that Charles Wychwood has succeeded in adding his face and name to the composite portrait of strong poets in the English literary tradition. However, the consequences are more far-reaching: just as detective Hawksmoor's obsessive attempts to solve the murders led him to repeat Dyer's actions and words and, eventually, to meet the eighteenth-century architect/magician in Little St. Hugh, so Charles's attempt to unearth the true life of Chatterton soon involves him in adopting Chatterton's actions, words, and ideas, and the same happens to Meredith after posing as a model for Chatterton's portrait, with the effect that both Meredith and Wychwood start having visions of Chatterton and eventually meet him at the atemporal moment of his (or rather, their) death, in a scene that closely follows the transhistorical meeting of Hawksmoor and Dyer at the end of *Hawksmoor*:

> I will not wholly die, then. Two others have joined him — the young man who passes him on the stairs [Meredith] and the young man who sits with bowed head by the fountain [Wychwood] — and they stand silently beside him. I will live for ever, he tells them. They link hands, and bow towards the sun (234).[11]

At the beginning of the novel, Chatterton appears to Charles and asks him to cross the threshold from the material world to the atemporal world of literature. As we have seen, this world is an overtly linguistic universe that recalls both the Barthesean notion of *pure écriture* and Jorge Luis Borges's self-contained and all-encompassing Library of Babel. Philip Slack is afraid of entering this world because within it he could not preserve his autonomy and identity as a writer. However, for Borges the concept of original authorship as defended by the romantics and symbolists would be not only an impossibility, but also an absurdity, for as Worton and Still (1990: 13) have pointed out, Borges shares with Montaigne the belief in a kind of eternal Supra-individual Spiritual Voice, a composite of the individual voices of all the dead poets, coexisting for ever in an eternal Now. Indeed, Borges — like Ackroyd — rejects the concept of linear chronological time in favor of the notion of co-temporality, and contends, in keeping with T. S. Eliot, that "each writer creates his precursors" (Borges, 1989: 90. My translation).

What Montaigne and Borges call the realm of the Supra-individual Spiritual Voice, William Blake would call "The Imagination which Liveth for Ever," which for Blake is the same as the *anthropos*, man's mystic or cosmic body: "The Eternal Body of Man is The IMAGINATION" (Ackroyd, 1995: 351). It is this compound cosmic body-and-voice, made up of the great poets and artists of the past, that Chatterton, Meredith, and Wychwood joyfully join with linked hands at the end of the novel, thus achieving immortality, not, however, on the higher, metaphysical sphere of Plato's Logos, but simply in the all-too-human realm of the creative imagination, the realm that still resounds with Nicholas Dyer's and Oscar Wilde's laughter, and also with William Blake's singing (Ackroyd, 1995: 367), and whose sight makes Chatterton smile (Ackroyd, 1988b: 234). But it must not be forgotten that, although only a "dream of wholeness, and of beauty, . . . the vision is real" and that "All the yearning and all the unhappiness and all the sickness can be taken away by that vision" (152). The words are Charles's, but they are also, undeniably, Peter Ackroyd's.

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[11] This scene brings to mind the medieval Christian idea, synthetically expressed by Stephen Dedalus in the "Proteus" chapter of *Ulysses*, that "The [navel]cords of all link back, strandentwining cable of all flesh. That is why mystic monks. Will you be as gods? Gaze in your omphalos" (Joyce, 1971: 43).

After *Chatterton* Ackroyd published *First Light* (1989), a novel that announced itself as "a great leap away from the urban world of *Hawksmoor* and *Chatterton*" (Rawson, 1989: 453). This description is accurate only literally, in the sense that the action of *First Light* does not take place in London, but rather in the rural south-west of England, in a fictional Pilgrin Valley situated on the Dorset-Devon border, near Lyme Regis and Axminster, which brings to mind the real Cheesecombe in Uplyme, where Ackroyd used to spend his holidays between 1986 and 1990, and also recalls the area in far North Devon near Wales, where Ackroyd owned Hannaford House between 1990 and 1994. Ackroyd considers this area a haunted part of England, and indeed it is a land full of mythical and literary echoes that shows its antiquity in the richness and variety of its fossils, of its prehistoric remains, and of its autochthonous folklore. In other words, although *First Light* is not situated in the mythical London of Ackroyd's earlier fiction, it is comparably situated in a mythical land whose origins go back to the dawn of civilization. What is more, the new novel shares thematically with Ackroyd's earlier fiction an overriding concern with time, with the constructedness of reality and with the myth of origins that obsessed Philip Slack and other humanist characters in Ackroyd's earlier fiction.

Structurally, *First Light* may be described as a multiplot novel that combines three main narrative lines. The first develops around the discovery of an ancient tumulus in Pilgrin Valley and the ensuing excavations carried out by a team directed by the archaeologist Mark Clare. They face the muted opposition of the local owners of the surrounding land, Farmer and Boy Mint. The second narrative line concerns the arrival at the valley of a retired music-hall comedian, Joey Hanover, and his wife, Floey, in search of the parents and home he lost at the age of five. The third centers on the observation of the stars carried out by the astronomer Damian Fall in Holblack Moor Observatory. In keeping with the tradition of the multiplot, an external omniscient narrator alternates the narration of these originally unrelated lines, progressively knitting an intricate net of relationships that will eventually materialize in the establishment of their mutual connection and interdependence. Embedded within the first narrative level, there is also a series of tales and visions (as in *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde*) told by several internal narrators that function as overtly literary iconic variations on different episodes in the main narrative lines, such as the story of the flying men in Peru, told by Mark Clare (1990: 46–48), or Joey Hanover's story of the children of Saint Gabriel who wanted to fly (111–14). One story, that of Herbert and Samuel (167–70) told by

Farmer Mint, may be said to function as an extradiegetic analepsis, that is, as a story that refers to an episode that took place outside the time of the diegesis; while another story, that of Michael Hare, the woodlander who infuses the wood with his human spirit lest it should decay and who had created "a map of the entire wood" for the woodlander who would "come to take his place one day" (205), may be said to function as a *mise en abyme* of the novel as a whole.

Although the protagonists of the three narrative lines had never met before they arrived at Pilgrin Valley, and although they are apparently pursuing their own particular goals, in fact they are equally obsessed with the myth of origins, which they try to verify at three complementary ontological levels: Mark Clare looks down into the bowels of the earth, cutting across geological layers in an attempt to reach the original prehistoric culture that flourished in the area at the origin of humankind; Damian Fall looks up into the sky and studies the movements of the stars as a way to reach back to the Big Bang, that is, the "first light," the atemporal moment of the creation of the cosmos (262); and Joey Hanover roams the surface of the valley in an attempt to establish his own origins through the recuperation of his lost family-line and place of birth. However, having forgotten the hermetic principle: "as below, so above; as above, so below," none of them realizes at the start that their respective quests for origins are complementary, that the past of the earth, of humankind, and of the stars are all interrelated manifestations of the unitary cosmos. Consequently, where a magician like Nicholas Dyer would attempt to achieve overall knowledge, the contemporary scientists are caught up in their own specialized areas of knowledge. The archaeologist Mark Clare, for example, is so specialized in his own narrow field that it is not until Damian Fall invites him to watch the stars from his observatory that he realizes that "the engraved whorls and spirals . . . found on the blind entrance of the tomb" (161) are a map of the Pleiades and not "some form of [undecipherable] handwriting" (137), as he had thought. Likewise, he is surprised to discover that the term used by Victorian astronomers to designate the darkened dome of an observatory was *Domus obscurata*, the exact equivalent of the archaeological term "fogou," the house under ground (98). Therefore, he is totally unaware at the start of the system of correspondences knitting together the three "houses" (and, therefore, the three narrative lines) in the novel: the observatory or "darkened house" above ground; the "mauve cottage" where Joey was born; and the "fogou" or house under ground, which form a vertical *axis mundi* or mythical structure connecting the three ontological levels into which

archaic thought divided the cosmos: the upper or celestial; the intermediate or earthly; and the subterranean or infernal (Eliade, 1989: 44).

Julian Hill, the site environmentalist in the archaeological team, is another good example of overspecialization. He dreams of a future archaeology in which "there would be no cause for excavation at all, [as everything would] be reproduced as holograms . . . there would be two worlds, therefore, one buried forever in darkness and one filled with light" (Ackroyd, 1990: 81). Hill is obviously unaware of Dyer's warning that "there is no Light without Darknesse and no Substance without Shaddowe" (Ackroyd, 1988a: 5). His unawareness is the more striking as — like Wychwood, Meredith, Chatterton, several tramps in the earlier novels, and the Irishman who works in Fraicheur's antique shop in *Chatterton* (1990: 75) — he is a young man "with unkempt red hair" (38), that is, in Ackroyd's symbolic system, a man who bears the marks of his stellar origins in "Aldebaran, the red giant" star (101).

The exception to the rule is the astronomer Damian Fall. Compared by the external narrator to "a priest who had lost his belief in God" (133), Fall shares many traits in common with Nicholas Dyer. The surname "Fall" — like the surname "Dyer" — already alludes to his condition of "shadow" character, that is, a character undergoing a gnostic process of self-fragmentation and alienation from society, described in the narrator's twentieth-century terminology as paranoia: "Damian's paranoia was like a sheet of ice between him and the world" (133). Aloof and depressive, Fall divides his time between Holblack Moor Observatory and the small thatched cottage in Pilgrin Valley he has rented from the Mints, who have owned the cottage for many generations. It is the place where Joey Hanover was born and lived until the age of five, when his mother Jenny Pocket disappeared near the tumulus. Though never clearly explained, her disappearance might have been caused by some kind of spell cast on her by Emily Trout, who hated Jenny because she was an outsider. Apparently Emily's witchcraft was inherited by her descendant, Lola Trout, "the uncrowned queen of Corcorum" (230), believed by her son to have poisoned her husband (232), and the Trouts seem to represent the shadow or dark emanation of the Mints. After the disappearance of Jenny, Joey's father (Samuel Mint) gave the child in adoption to a London family and then shot himself through the mouth (169). Joey only remembers three things from his childhood there: scraps of popular songs (145), a "high green hedge of purple flowers" (149), and what he calls his guardian angels "Angels watch me as I sleep. From bad dreams my soul to keep," that is, "the plaster casts of the faces, looking down at them from the corners of the room" (147), which his father had carved or fixed on either side of the lintel (94), on all the corners of the cottage (168) and upon the high ceiling (96) in a desperate attempt to protect his family against the impending evil.

Whenever strangers pass by the cottage and see Damian's dark figure through the window, they take him for a shadow (42), and the cottage is frequented by a black cat that scares visitors (42, 94). When Mark Clare and Evangeline Tupper, the senior civil-servant from the Department of the Environment, decide to visit the astronomer at the cottage, they see a figure that brings to mind the Fool carrying the heavy sack on his back in the Tarot, or Christian, the "man that could look no way but downwards, with a muck-rake in his hand," in John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*,: "a man in his forties, his dark hair already turning to grey and his face so thin, so hollowed out, that it was one which seemed to anticipate the very look of death . . . . Mark noticed that he had a slight stoop. This came from no physical cause but rather a moral one: he wanted . . . to placate other people" (Ackroyd, 1990: 95).

Another feature Damian Fall shares with Dyer is his capacity to feel and be affected by the traces left in places by their former inhabitants (128). During his first months in the seventeenth-century cottage, he had "sensed an overwhelming mood of patience, of the peace which springs from inevitability: In those early months the cottage possessed the endurance of generations, the habitual quietness of labour undertaken and completed. But he could no longer feel such things" (128). Fall attributes the change in the cottage's spirit of place to his own loss of hope and awareness of failure. However, "he sensed within these walls the presence of something else, of a despair which seemed to ebb and flow" (129). The despair Fall senses, as well as the apparition of the black cat and also, eventually, of "swarms of large flies blocking the light outside the windows" (293), run parallel to the progress of the archaeological works, which are constantly delayed by a sequence of mysterious accidents that, like those that took place in the Peruvian rain forest — and also in *The Great Fire of London* — give Pilgrin Valley the reputation of an unlucky site (126).

The cottage is decorated with a series of prints. On one wall hang portraits of the most famous astronomers in history; and opposite them three large prints of magicians are also hung in sequence (97). The sequential and oppositional arrangement of the astronomers and the magicians may be said to symbolize the ideological crux in which Damian Fall is caught: the more he analyzes in the observatory the drift of the

stars from the perspective of the New Physics, the more striking the coincidences he finds between his own conclusions and those of ancient myth. So, for example, watching the Pleiades, Fall reflects: "This was what the earlier men saw in the skies above them an unfathomable sea upon which they were drifting. Now we, too, talk of a universe filled with waves. We have returned to the first myth." (4). Analyzing the position of the Pleiades in the map carved by the ancient builders of the tumulus, Damian is forced to conclude that science has made no real progress, that, in fact, the ancient astronomers "must have been able to forecast the movement of the stars as accurately as we do" (162). He is panic-stricken by the thought that science might be just a human construction expressed in mathematical symbols, that is, in a system of representations as artificial as language. As he tells Mark: "Science is like fiction, you see. We make up stories, we sketch out narratives, we try to find some pattern beneath events . . . . Mathematics is like language. No one knows where it came from. No one really knows how it works. More horses and fishes. Horses and fishes trapped in signs" (159).

But what kind of civilization was it that built the ancient tumulus? For the press, the man buried in the tumulus is "a Merlin figure" (199); Mark Clare's wife, Kathleen, thinks the tumulus was built for a wise man or astronomer such as the ones described in a copy of *New Archaeology*. According to this source, they existed in the late neolithic period, belonged to a professional order supported by the labors of a rural population and transmitted their knowledge from generation to generation by verse and by ballad (26). Mark Clare compares them to the flying men in the rain forest of Peru (4648), and he believes they go back to the megalithic period (99). However, according to Farmer Mint, the wise man buried in the tumulus is much older, he is "the head of the family . . . the original Mint" (302), whose life on earth goes "Right back to the beginning" (304). Samuel Mint considers them guardian angels. And Damian Fall identifies them as "creatures of light leaping across the firmament" (3, 327) who existed before the creation of time. In other words, for the Mints and the astronomer they are mythical creatures, like Adam and Eve, who lived *in illo tempore*, in the paradisiacal communion of a prelapsarian unitary cosmos, where primordial man harmoniously coexisted with God and the Devil, before his expulsion to the wilderness, the chaos outside, caused by a ritual fault or sin.

When the forest fire exposes the tumulus, what the archaeologists see is a beautifully green, idyllic rural landscape, which they find monotonous and simple. Thus, for example, Evangeline Tupper, on hearing the name of the nearby village, ironically exclaims: "Corcorum. What a lovely old English name. Like sheepdog. Or muffins" (9). Of all the archaeologists that form part of the team, only Mark Clare is dimly aware that the valley must have been sacred for the people who built the tumulus, and that "Perhaps they thought of it as a centre of the earth" (8). Indeed, for all its apparent pastoral atony, the valley possesses all the mythical traits of an *imago mundi*, that is, of an image of the cosmos, reproducing the original harmony of *illud tempus*, the mythical Golden Past. According to mythical thought, chaos and cosmos are always in dialectical opposition. Usually, the cosmos is conceived as an enclosed, ordered place, like the Garden of Eden or the medieval *hortus conclusus*, where the harmonious coexistence of chaos and cosmos is symbolized in the Tree of Knowledge or the Tree of Good and Evil. In Pilgrin Valley, the ancient forest of ash-trees (the kind of trees from which, according to Sir James Frazer, the magician-king tore the golden bough, the symbol of his all-encompassing knowledge and power), symbolizes the wilderness or realm of chaos that encloses the cosmos with its three "houses" (the observatory, the cottage and the tumulus) whose vertical arrangement symbolizes the point of intersection of the three cosmic levels. This vertical structure constitutes the *axis mundi*, the Center of the World, also called the *umbilicus mundi*, or *omphalos*, the world's navel, variously represented in different archaic cultures as a vertical circular stone or a circle of stones, as a mountain or column, as a ziggurat, pyramid, ladder, or tree.

The complementary relation between the observatory and the tumulus is evident at first sight. The domed-shaped observatory with its huge telescope made of innumerable "primary mirrors and secondary mirrors" (131), "moving fractionally to the east and then to the north" (133), is like a huge eye staring at the stars. Likewise, the dome-like tumulus, erected in a position from which "it must once have dominated the valley," seems to Mark Clare like "a single eye staring up at the heavens" (13).[12] Watching the sky through the telescope Damian Fall feels like a pilot "on a storm-tossed boat out at sea, the dark waves around me" (4). Similarly, when the archaeological team enters the center of the tumulus they know that they are "in a cavern beneath the earth but they may be floating away, the stone turned to water and cloud around them" (283). Further, while Damian Fall muses on the possibility that the telescope might take him back to "the time of ori-

[12] The comparison curiously recalls the eye-shaped stone carvings in Arthur Machen's "The Shining Pyramid" (1995).

gin" (262), Mark Clare imagines that the never-ending maze-like corridors of the tumulus might lead him down to the very center of the earth, where "time stands still" (100). What is more, for Damian the observatory looked at first sight like "a giant's head emerging from the ground with a curious upright ridge of hair running across the skull" (129) which recalls both the red hair of some characters and "the red giant" Aldebaran, while Mark, perusing a volume of *Dorset Antiqua*, finds an eighteenth-century sketch of the tumulus that strikingly looks "like a Leviathan [dominating] the rolling landscape" (34).

During the first stage of the excavation, Mark finds in an antechamber, guarding the false entrance to the tumulus, a hanged man crouching in a foetal position like the propitiatory victims killed and buried by Nicholas Dyer in the foundations of his churches. As he proceeds further down, he is progressively affected by a strange apathy, what the archaeologists call "Stone Age gloom" (80), and when he finds the porthole that leads to the central passage, he has an acute feeling of being "straddled between two worlds the upper half of his body now within the tomb as he peered forward eagerly, the lower half still protruding into the outer world. Part of him had been swallowed up" (184). In other words, he has a vivid feeling of falling into what Joseph Campbell would call "the belly of the whale" (1978), or, if we prefer, into the Leviathan's jaws that is, of crossing the threshold between the cosmogonic levels of Earth and Hell. With neat symmetry, the equivalent of this subterranean door to Hell is provided at Earth level by "the narrow stairs which are cut into the Cobb and which are known as 'Granny's Teeth'" (73), and, at the level of Heaven, by "Lud Mouth" (129), the coastal area that, fittingly, leads to Holblack Moor Observatory and that is seen from the top of Swithin Column, the abandoned tower used as an astronomical observatory (208–9). Significantly, after his fall into the abysmally dark pit of the tumulus, Mark has "a sudden feeling of exhilaration" and the sensation that he "might have been lowered by angels" (286), just before seeing a beam of light "travelling upward and slightly aslant so that it resembled a ladder of light" (286). That is, Mark, like Nicholas Dyer, paradoxically finds the ladder to heaven and the "first light" in the utter darkness of the infernal pit.

Dyer's aim in building his churches was to construct an *imago mundi*, an image of the world. Likewise, as Mark reaches the star-shaped polygonal chamber at the center of the tumulus, he hears himself repeat what he considers "nonsense words, but words that reclaimed this place for human occupation: 'I am making a

mappemunde'" (185). During his life on earth, the wise man buried in the tumulus (like Nicholas Dyer) had tried to apply his knowledge to control the influence of Aldebaran, "the star which controlled all the sighs and tears of the earth" (295). He had ensured that this control over the power of the star would continue after his death with the construction of the star-like tumulus, in which he had sealed himself, thus sacrificing his desire to return to his original home in heaven for the sake of the people. Inside the tumulus, Mark has a vision of the wise man asking his subjects to build "the house of stone. Pointing one way. Only one way. Beneath. And only he may walk the avenue under the earth" (322). When the forest fire revealed the existence of the tumulus to the archaeologists they could not understand why it was on the edge of an area of burnt forest marked by stones forming "an ellipse more than a mile in circumference, so that the actual center lies over the valley" (239). That is, they failed to realize that the dome-shaped tumulus, encircled by long wooden poles "which had all been burnt at the same time [representing] a ritual conflagration after the tomb had been sealed" (137), was imitating the position of a planet or fixed star describing a parabolic curve on its course around the sun. The star the tumulus replicates is Aldebaran, as the phonetic closeness of the star's and the magician's names suggests. At the beginning of the novel, Clare intuits that there might be "peripheral burials further out in the valley" (36). Later on, watching the tumulus at a distance in the middle of the night, he sees "how there had once been a pyre upon it, a fire lit and then succeeded by other fires in the same region. He saw the pattern of flame across the countryside and, yes, it took the shape of the stars directly above the tumulus. The ancient fires imitated the star-glow of the Pleiades. Earth reflecting the sky" (104). In other words, Clare eventually realizes that the tumulus and the other subsidiary pyres scattered across the valley reproduce on a large scale the stone carved "mappemunde" he had found covering the walls and ceiling of the central chamber of the tumulus. We can conclude, therefore, that Pilgrin Valley, the cosmos created by the wise man, is the earthly macrocosmic replica of the Pleiades, with the main tumulus replicating Aldebaran, while the "Old Barren One" himself is the microcosmic or human equivalent of the giant red star. In other words, he is an *anthropos*, the primordial cosmic man in Vitrubius's theory, which Leonardo da Vinci memorably drew as a star man with arms and legs outstretched. Still, making good the hermetic formula "as below, so above; as above, so below," the earthy reflection of the stars also works the

other way, for, as Damian Fall is astonished to observe, Aldebaran itself "has taken on the shape of Pilgrin Valley" (155).

We have seen how the beginning and end of a cosmogonic cycle is usually marked by an apocalyptic fire. The beginning and end of the tumulus are likewise marked by a forest fire (7). During the four thousand years that the cycle lasted, the people in the valley had looked after the tumulus, passing on their secret knowledge in their fables, songs, and ballads, even though in a progressively fragmentary form. This is why Farmer Mint tells Joey Hanover the "history lesson" (121) about his parents as a tale, beginning with the formula "Once upon a time . . . " (167); it is why Joey, the last Mint, can only remember his past in the form of a tale (111–14) and why his speech is made up of fragments of popular ballads and songs; it is also why whenever a member of the extended Mint family died, he or she was incinerated in the tumulus, for they all have a clear sense of connectedness among themselves with the star man, with the earth, the animals, and the plants in the valley and with the stars above them. The star man's creation of this unitary cosmos caused time to stand still: life in the valley seems to follow an unchangeable pattern of birth, reproduction, and death, as Mark observes: "Had there been an essential change from the time when the stones were used as arrow heads until this time, now . . .?" (41). Indeed, chronological time is so meaningless in the valley that, while Augustine Fraicheur's antique shop in nearby Lyme Regis is full of every conceivable kind of clock, "all of them measuring time with weights and balances, springs and wires" (75), the Mint farm is presided over by "a clock, constructed of heavy ebony [that] had come to a halt many years before" (56). Before the arrival of the archeologists, Damian Fall feels in the cottage the peace and quietness springing from "the endurance of generations" (128), a situation that comes to an end when the tumulus is unearthed and systematically destroyed by the archeologists, with the consequence that the harmonious knot of sympathetic magic that had kept the balance between good and evil, cosmos and chaos, for over four thousand years comes to an end.

Fittingly, the disruption of this balance in the valley is experienced by Damian Fall as "the death of the cosmos" (296). After the "Old Barren One" is removed from the tumulus, Fall is astonished to discover that Aldebaran, "the dying star" (293), had reversed its course and "was now moving towards the earth. It was approaching at enormous speed" (295). A little earlier he had seen that the engravings upon the cottage wall "were no longer still, but seemed to have been

infused with life. The chart of the Pleiades began to move and shimmer" (294). At this moment he comprehends that "this cottage was a tumulus, too" (293). At the same time, Fall becomes "afraid, literally afraid, of his own Shadow" (294), which he identifies with the star: "Damian could see the true identity of Aldebaran . . . . Yes, that was it. He was haunted by the ghost of Aldebaran. The ghost was in the room with him" (295).

Other characters also witness the strange phenomena caused by the destruction of the tumulus. When, incapable of protecting the "Old Barren One" from the archaeologists, the Mints eventually decide to set fire to the coffin, Joey Hanover has an experience of temporal disruption: "Time turning" (321). Watching the body, he is transported backward, to the time when the wise man died. And he has a vision of the star man "touch[ing] hands with the one before him, and touch[ing] hands with the one who follows" (322), which echoes the vision of Chatterton, Meredith, and Wychwood with joined hands at the end of *Chatterton*. Then, in a scene that recalls the palimpsest of faces emerging from the fake Chatterton portrait, when the flames reduce the wise man's fleshly garment to ashes, Joey "sees in this face, too, the faces of all those who had come before him. And the faces of all those he has known. This is the human face he recognised in all those he has loved" (323). Significantly, this scene is parallel to Fall's puzzled realization that the numbers in the computer recording the fall of Aldebaran from its sphere were "merging into one another so fast that they seemed like a series of faces entwined with one another" (296).

For the Mints it is clear that the spirit of the star man "had been released at last. He had returned to the frame of origins. The ashes rose into the sky, higher and higher, rising towards Aldebaran and the other stars" (326). However, the release of the star man's spirit also means the release of his hold on the evil forces of chaos which he had kept buried "beneath." Damian Fall acutely senses this evil flowing into the old cottage, where he has a growing feeling that he "was surrounded by some inexplicable and unfathomable horror" (177). As we know, the cottage has behind it a tragic history of death and suicide associated with witchcraft. Fall has described it as another tumulus, and the cottage, with its carved star men and its encircling high hedge of fire-like "purple flowers" (148), may be seen as representing the intermediate or "earthly" point of intersection between the "heavenly" observatory and the "hellish" tumulus towards which both Aldebaran and the "Old Barren One" now converge, for it is on this intermediate ontological

level that the forces of Light and Darkness must fight a new battle for preeminence. It is also here that they find Damian Fall, the astronomer, the only man capable of restoring harmony to the valley, by the repetition of a new ritual act of creation of the cosmos.

At the beginning of the novel Damian Fall is at Holblack Moor Observatory talking to his assistant Alec about the origins of the universe and equating the New Physics to "the first myth" (4). Echoing the circularity of mythical time, the novel, with neat symmetry, ends with the same speech, although Damian Fall, who is now in bed — perhaps in a mental asylum — is addressing the same speech to his own shadow, which he identifies with Aldebaran (327). At this stage, the reader also realizes that the identification of Aldebaran with Damian Fall was already inscribed in the surname "Fall," which prefigures the fall of Aldebaran from its sphere (296). This identity is also suggested when, watching the fall of the red giant in the computer, Damian "caught his own face reflected in that screen, bathed in red with the mouth and eyes quite dark" (297). In other words, the novel ends leaving Fall in the position of the various visionary characters in earlier fiction who were considered mad by their contemporaries, whereas, in fact, he is the only one who "knows"; he is the new astronomer to whom the star man has chosen to transmit his knowledge, or, to put it differently, in whom he has been reincarnated; Damian Fall is, therefore, the new star man on whose shoulders rests the responsibility of restoring the lost harmony between man and cosmos, but he is also the Fool on whose shoulders rests the pain and sorrow of the world, as Evangeline Tupper intuits — "Someone is playing the fool" (124) — a Christ figure, as he himself realizes (177), who, like Dyer, must be both propitiatory victim and murderer (178), hanged man and magus, that is, who must know the depths of utter good and evil. And, although the task appalls him at the start, Damian Fall seems eventually to accept his fate, as he is not afraid of his shadow any more, but rather smiles at it (327).

According to mythical thought, the expulsion from paradise and man's ensuing loss of contact with the divinity reduces him to a single plane of existence: his human nature. This is the state in which Damian Fall — and also Mark Clare and the other twentieth-century characters — find themselves at the beginning of the novel. Therefore, when Fall starts experiencing the presence of Aldebaran/ "Old Barren One" within himself, he is tempted to accept other people's opinions (176) about his paranoia. Reduced to his human nature, Damian cannot conceive of other planes of existence. Consequently, for him, the discovery of the many coincidences between the findings of the New Physics and

the postulates of myth is so shattering that it reduces him to a foetal position, or, perhaps, transforms him, like Hawksmoor/Dyer at the end of *Hawksmoor*, into a child again:

> there were no stars, *there were only words* with which we choose to decorate the sky. The universe was a structure . . . established upon what? Nothing. And as he looked up he was filled with the fear of emptiness, the fear of non-being. And he became nothing. He crept into a corner of the observatory and sat down with his knees drawn up against his chest, crouched under the vast emptiness of the universe.
>
> (297, my emphasis)

Damian's fear of non-being is like the angst of the Beckettian hero confronted with the belief that he cannot transcend the prison of his own mind, that there is an unbridgeable gap between the external ontology and the — linguistic or mathematical — human representations of reality. Therefore, for Damian — as for Oscar Wilde, Charles Wychwood, Philip Slack, and the Mints — the only solution is to accept Blake's contention that the human imagination has a transcendental capacity, that the human representations of reality are true. This is the lesson Chatterton transmits to Charles Wychwood and this is indeed the secret carefully kept by the Mints that had allowed the "Old Barren One" to transcend his human condition and become a star man.

It is only within this transcendental logic that the many metafictional and intertextual allusions suffusing the novel acquire their true dimension: they are not realism-undermining mechanisms but, on the contrary, the very guarantee of the novel's truthfulness and reality. Within this logic, it is easy to understand why the description of Pilgrin Valley, with its subterranean caves and river and its dome-like tumulus follows so closely Coleridge's famous description of Kubla Khan's palace in Xanadu;[13] and it explains why the characters themselves are likewise built on the accumulation of literary echoes. Mark Clare, for example, with his "long sideburns which covered half of his cheeks" (8) and his "green deerstalker hat" (6) may be described as a parodic crossbreed of Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson, while his deep suffering and his feeling of alienation and self-fragmentation makes him akin to detective Hawksmoor. But the personality of the archaeologist is

[13] "In Xanadu did Kubla Khan/ A stately pleasure-dome decree/ Where Alph, the sacred river ran/ Through caverns measureless to man/ Down to a sunless sea." (Jackson, ed., 1994: 102). The passage also echoes Milton's *Paradise Lost* and the archetypal description of Paradise in the Bible.

further complicated by his allusive surname "Clare," which he owes to Thomas Hardy's character, Angel Clare, from *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. Thus the name itself reminds the reader that the Dorset-Devon border where the novel is situated is the literary world of "Wessex," Hardy's mythical land peopled by "the folk," peasants whose life is ruled by magic and measured by seasonal time, at the center of which is Egdon Heath, the magical wilderness where Lear, the mythical King of Wessex used to live. This is also the area where Jane Austen set an important episode of *Persuasion*, and John Fowles the action of *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, as well as the archetypal Edenic garden in whose heart Mr. Bartholomew, Fowles's protagonist in *A Maggot*, eventually finds Dolling cave, the mother-earth womb-like cave where he succeeds in bringing about his transformation from man to *anthropos*.[14]

In the novel, the parodic equivalent of Hardy's folk are the Mints, the rural people who, according to *New Archaeology*, supported the wise men and kept their wisdom alive in their popular songs and ballads. However, for all their apparent garrulousness and rustic simplicity, Farmer and Boy Mint do not look like peasants, but clowns. Farmer Mint with "his usual collection of heterogeneous garments [and] old flat cap," and his hair "sprouting from all over his face and head," stands for the silly clown, while Boy Mint with his almost complete hairlessness (19) and his puzzling witticisms stands for the clever clown. Indeed their behavior is so suspect that, after talking with them, Mark considers the possibility that Farmer and Boy Mint "had been putting on an act, that they had been performing for his benefit" (21). As Claude Rawson has pointed out, "they don't exactly talk like the real thing. Their idiom is part stage-Wessex, part Ackroyd-raconteurese, as though Spike Milligan were mimicking the Archers" (1989: 453). In other words, their speech betrays their condition as fictional characters.

Once again the novel points to its condition of literary artifact. Mark Clare's dog, Jude, which for Mark is "an emblem of some general helplessness which he shared" (287), is fittingly named after Jude the Obscure, the timorous Hardy protagonist whose empathy with nature is so strong that he weeps when he sees the bleeding stumps of pruned trees and is incapable of scaring the birds feeding in the fields. Again, where Farmer Lodge's wife, in Hardy's short story "The Withered Arm" suffers from a mysterious ailment in her arm that leads her to a tragic death, Mark Clare's wife, Kathleen, has a malformed leg that is

[14] Cf. Onega, 1989: 37–63, on the mythical element in *A Maggot*.

the cause of her overwhelming fits of depression and eventual suicide. But where Mrs. Lodge's withered arm brought about her husband's horrified rejection of her, Kathleen's withered leg is the source of Mark Clare's pitiful love and desire to protect her. Mark's love for Kathleen goes back to the day when he saw her alone on the shore, standing by the water and watching other children play (28–29, 208) in a scene that simultaneously evokes the scene in Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* in which Stephen Dedalus, watching the "bird girl" standing in midstream and gazing out to sea, starts thinking of himself as a writer/magician, as well as the parodic inversion of this scene in the "Nausicaa" chapter in *Ulysses*, when Leopold Bloom's sexual reverie prompted by the contemplation of Gerty on the shore comes to an abrupt end, as he realizes that she is crippled.[15]

Another example would be the episode in which Kathleen, after receiving the letter from the Adoption Office, distractedly "hurried forward towards the Cobb, apparently staring at something far out across the water . . . . Suddenly she slipped and . . . fell sideways onto the ground" (73). This combines three episodes in Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman*: the one in which Charles Smithson watches Sarah at the end of the Cobb looking out over a rough sea; another one in which she slips and falls to her knees in the Undercliff; and the episode in which she makes Charles believe she has twisted her ankle at the Endicott Family Hotel, which itself recalls the episode in *Persuasion* in which Louisa, being "jumped down" from the Cobb by Wentworth, falls and is badly injured.

Other characters, places, and episodes are likewise intertextually connected to Hardy's Wessex novels. As María José Auría has noted (1995: 317), the observatory in which Damian Fall works, Holblack Moor Observatory, derives its name from the vale of "Blakemoor or Blackmoor," where Tess comes from; Samuel Mint's unfortunate wife, Jenny Pocket, whom he found in the wood, is the daughter of a "spar-maker" (Ackroyd, 1990: 167), like Marty South in *The Woodlanders*. And Claude Rawson has pointed out how "the astronomer Damian Fall

[15] The overt "literariness" of the scene is enhanced stylistically in the combination of a pastiche of T. S. Eliot's categories of time in "Little Gidding" with the technique Joyce used in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* of beginning a series of adjacent paragraphs with the same phrase or sentence to introduce a "picture": "Another time. He knows her now . . . . Another time. Later still . . . ," and so on (29–30).

shares a surname with Mr. Fall, the weather prophet in *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (also remembered in *Tess*)," and how:

> There is a Woodlander, first on the scene when Mrs Clare jumps to her death from a disused tower known as Swithin's Column. Swithin is the first name of the astronomer [Swithin St. Cleeve] in Hardy's *Two on a Tower*, and the tower (also called a column) which he uses as his observatory is one in which Lady Constantine dies at the end of Hardy's novel. (1989: 453)

We have seen how Philip Slack in *Chatterton* was afraid of crossing the threshold into the linguistic world of books, because he feared that he would lose his individual voice in the Borgesian Library of Babel. Kathleen, by contrast, longs to "get inside a book and never come out again" (Ackroyd, 1990: 50). For her books represent "alternative worlds in which she might lose herself, imaginary landscapes in which she might walk freely for the first time" (51). On their first visit to Swithin Column, Mark and Kathleen find "a scrap of paper, apparently torn from a book" on which some words are still legible, although they are "obscured by a green patina of vegetable decay" (207). The words are from Hardy's novel *Two on a Tower*, as the ensuing epigraph (211) makes clear. As Rawson explains: "In a parallel scene in Hardy's novel, Lady Constantine enters the tower and also finds a scrap of paper, not old or written upon, but which on the contrary 'arrested her attention by its freshness . . . [and] had nothing on it.'" Rawson astutely concludes: "There's a sense in which she [Kathleen] has after all entered 'the plot of a novel' without realizing it" (1989: 453). Likewise, at the beginning of the novel Mark Clare looks up at the sky in a clear, calm night and is reminded of a similar scene in *Far From the Madding Crowd* (34), but, like Kathleen, he is totally unaware of the intertextual relationship between the scene and his own situation. Thus Kathleen and Mark "enter" the Hardy novels — as the characters in *The Great Fire of London* enter the plot of *Little Dorrit* — without realizing it.

Still, whereas in *The Great Fire of London* the major hypertext was just one Dickensian novel, in *First Light* the intertextual references to Hardy scattered throughout are better described as generic, pointing both to a particular spirit of place and to the overtly literary and derivative nature of the characters. But to say that Hardy provides the only intertexts of *First Light* would be totally misleading. The novel is also perceptibly suffused with echoes of Blake, Dickens, Eliot, Fowles, Frazer, Joyce, Kipling, Melville, Sheridan, Dylan Thomas, Voltaire, and Wilde, as well as echoes of Ackroyd's own earlier fiction. It is easy to

see, for example, the relationship between Augustine Fraicheur, the flashy gay antiquarian who specializes in clocks — "Clocks the spécialité de la maison" (69) — and Pat, the transvestite gym teacher from Bristol in *Chatterton*. There is also a correspondence between Fraicheur's antique shop and Leno's Antiques, between the old lesbian couple formed by Evangeline Tupper and her "assistant" Hermione Crisp and the couple formed by Harriet Scrope and Sarah Tilt in *Chatterton*, and between the characters drawn on the pattern of the London music-hall comedian in *Chatterton*, and Joey Hanover, the retired music-hall and television star who has come to the region in search of his lost parents. The narrator overtly associates Joey's persona to that of Dan Leno and Max Miller, and he compares him with Mathews and Grimaldi, with whom he is even made to share physical features (68). This twentieth-century inheritor of the music-hall tradition "was also famous for his 'Joeyisms' or malapropisms, which in fact he stole from his wife's ordinary conversation" (68). Indeed, Joey's wife, Floey, the former music-hall dancer, owes much to Sheridan's character in *The Rivals*, Mrs. Malaprop. Her malapropisms are so wild and recurrent that they would put Mrs. Malaprop herself to shame, but her slips of the tongue are also sometimes cunningly metafictional. For example, when Joey and Floey are met by a dog barking ferociously at the gate of the Mint farm where Joey is hoping to find the answers to questions about his origins, she says: "Do you know what that sounds like? . . . . that sounds like the Hound of the D'Urbervilles" (164). Floey's ludicrous mistakes also bring to mind the constant misquotations of Harriet Scrope in *Chatterton* and are matched by Joey's own increasing inability to remember the lines of the songs that intersperse his speech, a clear symptom of the diminished condition of the ancient culture he represents. Further, as their artistic names suggest, "Joey and Floey" share the Punch and Judy clownishness that forms such an intrinsic part of Harriet Scrope's and of Mr. and Mrs. Leno's personalities. Further still, Joey Hanover's quest for paternity may be seen both as a parody of Hardy's *The Return of the Native* and of Stephen Dedalus's climactic encounter with Leopold Bloom in *Ulysses*, while his dinner party with the Mints parodies Augustine Fraicheur's comic adaptation of T. S. Eliot's play *The Family Reunion*. Indeed, the list of intertextual references could be extended *ad infinitum*, for *First Light*, like the earlier Ackroyd novels, is a Borgesian Library of Babel, a self-conscious textual world peopled by cardboard characters, capable, however, of dreaming themselves into immortality by virtue of Ackroyd's magus-like act of imaginative creation, a novel, that is, written to demonstrate in practice the wrongness

of Sir James G. Frazer's statement in *The Golden Bough*, reproduced in the epigraph to Part Six, that "all magic is necessarily false and barren" (291).

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3: *English Music* and *The House of Doctor Dee*

THE YEAR 1990 MARKED THE PUBLICATION of *Dickens*, the formidable, 1,195 page biography of the early Victorian novelist who may be considered to be one of Ackroyd's strongest predecessors. Defined in the postscript as "the last of the great eighteenth-century novelists and the first of the great symbolic novelists," Dickens is also for Ackroyd the writer who managed to express in his fiction a vision of the world that combined his concern with "the central human progress of the world [with] a longing for transcendence also" (1990: 1081).

As Ackroyd explains in *Dickens*, he had started writing the book in September 1988, but for months before he was collating a vast amount of information into a day-by-day account of Dickens's life (895). That is, Ackroyd had been gathering material for the biography at the same time as he was working on *Chatterton* and *First Light*, two novels that are resonant with Dickensian echoes.

The year before Ackroyd had contributed the introduction to *Dickens' London. An Imaginative Vision* (1987), a book of pictures with a commentary by Piers Dudgeon that attempts to recreate the atmosphere of the various parts of London where Dickens had lived. The photographs reveal London as the "precarious refuge" of Dickens's early years, but also as "a place of darkness . . . imprisonment and suffocation" (Ackroyd, 1994: 7). Although Ackroyd's contribution to this book is fairly brief (7–21), it is significant that it focuses Dickens's work from the perspective of his relationship to the transcendental and visionary London that Ackroyd himself cherishes in his own fiction; thus Ackroyd states in his opening remark that the photographs show how "London created Dickens, just as Dickens created London" (7). This haunting London of the 1820s and 1830s, focused from the fearful and bewildered perspectives of Dickens's forlorn and orphaned children fascinates Ackroyd to such a point that he will try to recreate it in his next novel, *English Music* (1992), a novel that may be said to culminate Ackroyd's ever-increasing obsession with his Victorian predecessor.

After finishing the biography, Ackroyd published *Introduction to Dickens* (1991), a book that may be described as a synthesized and much shorter (177 pages) version of *Dickens*. It provides a clear outline

of the main stages of Dickens's life and career as a journalist, creative writer, and public reader, in a way that anticipates Ackroyd's constant attempts in *Dickens* to unearth and to explain what he considers to be the intimate relationship knitting together Dickens's life and work, underlining, for example, the way in which "certain aspects of his childhood materially affected the form and the manner of his fiction as well as its explicit content" (1991: 11).

The same aim suffuses the huge biography of Dickens published the year before. *Dickens* was received by its numerous and expectant reviewers with divided opinions. Generalizing, we could say that creative writers, unconcerned with scholarly conventions, were on the whole enthusiastic and ready to subscribe to Anthony Burgess's remark that "Mr Ackroyd's immense book . . . is to be praised without reservation" (1990: 19). However, academic reviewers tended to offer more qualified praise. Stephen Gill, for example, was ready to admit that "*Dickens* is a very thorough book. The commentary on the novels is always fresh and imaginative, directing us to what is most important, the energy, the power and the beauty of Dickens' prose" (1990: 911). Still, for Gill — and also for John Sutherland (1990), Verlyn Klinkenborg (1993), and Dickens's earlier biographer Fred Kaplan (1990) — *Dickens* also has serious flaws. One is Ackroyd's irrepressible tendency to assume the style and rhetoric of a nineteenth-century omniscient narrator, and to pinpoint his narrative with rhetorical questions, addresses to the reader, monosyllabic staccato sentences or phrases, and other stylistic devices, whose effect Gill finds "tedious and disjointed" (911). Another is the dubious status of the biography, for, although in size and thoroughness of research it is clearly aimed at a scholarly audience, it constantly flouts such scholarly conventions as the use of footnotes, chapter titles or running-heads, or even dates "by which scholarship is made available and usable" (Gill, 1990: 911). But the major source of complaint for this kind of reviewer was the interpolation of seven fictional interludes that undercut the apparently traditional chronological arrangement of the narration of Dickens's life from birth to death. In these interludes the reader is surprised to find Dickens talking with his own characters (Ackroyd, 1990: 100–105); or attending a Greenwich Fair with them where, apparently, the characters discover that they can survive their author's death (614–17); or leading "A TRUE conversation" with Ackroyd's strong predecessors, T. S. Eliot, Chatterton, and Oscar Wilde, while they wait for Blake (427–32); and even talking with Peter Ackroyd himself, who is following him in the streets of London (306–8), or talking with him about the biography (753–55). In the penultimate

interlude Ackroyd is interviewed by an academic about his aim in writing the biography (892–96); in the final interlude Ackroyd confesses to the reader that "I HAVE only dreamt once of Charles Dickens," and that, in his dream, "he was still alive even as I was writing my biography of him" (1059–60).

With the seven interludes Ackroyd simply meant to undermine the "orthodox 'life and work' divide in most biographies" (893), but in fact he creates a time-space continuum that obliterates the boundaries between past and present, between waking and dreaming, and between fiction and reality; that is, he creates a characteristic Ackroydian world in which the roles of character and author and of biographer and reviewer are complementary and interchangeable parts of the same endeavor. From this perspective, the fact that the biography is preceded by a prologue (xi-xvi) in which the death of Dickens is narrated acquires its true dimension, for this prologue transforms the apparent linear structure of *Dickens* into a circular structure (like that of every Ackroyd novel), echoing at the formal level Ackroyd's mythical dimension of time and his belief that "in some sense, he [Dickens] had not died" (1060), that Dickens — like Chatterton, Meredith, Wilde, Wychwood and the other real and fictional writers in Ackroyd's canon — go on living for ever in the atemporal and sublime World of Art.

In other words, the interpolation of the seven fictional interludes, as well as what the critics called the contamination of Ackroyd's style by that of Dickens is a recurrent feature observable in his earlier poetry and fiction, the result of an overall endeavor to confer a mythical or transcendental dimension to his writings by means of the absorption of the voices and styles of his strong predecessors. The fact that Ackroyd should have attempted to extend this method to a biography — that is, to a nonfiction form of writing — has been explained by A. S. Byatt (a creative-writer-*cum*-academic-critic), as a "problem" evincing the fact that: Ackroyd "has tried to write a novelist's biography, not a scholar's" (1992: 20M). Perhaps a more accurate description of *Dickens* would be to say that it is the work of a writer for whom poetry, fiction, and biography are not separate activities, but rather "part of the same undertaking" (Onega, 1996: 212); a writer also for whom the concepts of truth and reality are inseparable from that of creative imagination, so that, for Ackroyd, the insights into Dickens's personality and work offered by the imaginative material are not less truthful or real than the factual material in more conventional biographies. Indeed, for Ackroyd, even the most rigorously researched biography is dated and subjective, nothing more than "the bias of a particular writer in a particular era"

(Ackroyd, 1990: 895). In other words, *Dickens* is the product of a writer who holds a poststructuralist and deconstructionist conception of writing as free play, one whose work as a whole constantly aspires to the ideal Barthesean category of pure writing.

Reading the biography, it is easy to see that Ackroyd's reliance on the creative power of the human imagination is a feature he has inherited not only from Chatterton, Blake, Eliot, and Oscar Wilde, but also from Dickens. As Ackroyd points out, for Dickens, "the real and the unreal, the material and the spiritual, the specific and the imagined, the mundane and the transcendental, exist in uneasy relation and are to be contained only within the power of the created word" (xiv–xv). Ackroyd quotes a remark by Dickens's daughter, Mamie, to sustain this view: "[Mamie] said that her father in fact lived in his books and there is indeed a sense in which his characters were so real, and so independent, that he himself merely dwelt among them." Still, Dickens's belief in the reality of his characters was not at all naïve, for, as Ackroyd hastens to explain: "Part of him always realised that they were unreal, however, that they were phantoms of his own imagining." For Ackroyd, this paradoxical awareness is the "unfathomable" mystery informing Dickens's "genius and his own self" (401).

Rather than Dickens the journalist, traveler, impresario, editor and *pater familias*, or socially committed radical and philanthropist, what truly interests Ackroyd is Dickens the writer, whose imagination "created an alternative world sometimes more real than the world in which he lived or moved," the Dickens who "somehow managed to write himself" into existence by virtue of his creative imagination (401), and who is constantly portrayed "sitting deep in thought and surrounded" by his characters, the "magic realist" (Ackroyd, 1991: 10) writer for whom the real and the unreal "exist in uneasy relation," but also the writer who embodied the zeitgeist of the period, the writer, that is, whose "particular genius [was] to turn his life itself into an emblem of that period" (Ackroyd, 1990: xv).

Other related aspects of Dickens that Ackroyd finds of crucial importance for the understanding of the early Victorian genius — and, we may add, for an understanding of Ackroyd's art as well — include, for example, Dickens's deep interest in occultism and in the healing power of hypnotism or mesmerism, which he used with his wife and acquaintances with impressive results on several occasions (234–5, 366, 448–51, 573). Ackroyd notes how mesmerism was "an aspect of the guiding principles of the age [and] a subject of debate and controversy in the late Thirties and Forties" (244). The theory of mesmerism "was intimately related to the belief in 'animal magnetism'; the belief, in other words, that the powers of the human body could be conducted and controlled by an invisible fluid, and that by the careful management of this mesmeric fluid the sick human subject could be cured or revived" (244). Another aspect of Dickens's personality that interests Ackroyd is the Victorian writer's delight in such popular entertainments as the theatre, the music hall, and the vaudeville, which in Dickens's case was combined with an intrinsic gift for acting and impersonation that he exercised at will in his numerous public readings, where the audience was often reduced to sympathetic tears or hysterical laughter and even fell prey to fainting fits, apparently induced by Dickens's creation of a "highly suggestive state which was in some ways close to that of the mesmeristic trance" (245). Yet another was Dickens's fascination with his own dreams and the visions that appeared in them, some of "which entailed some form of pre-cognition" (359). As Ackroyd further explains: "Dickens suggests that the strongest dreams are those which create a kind of allegory of the world; that dreams are, in that sense, at the root of all fiction" (359).

Dickens's tendency to confuse the real and the unreal, the world of "waking life" and the "land of shadows" (360), strikingly recalls a similar capacity in William Blake (1757–1827), the great visionary poet and engraver to whom Ackroyd devotes his fourth biography, *Blake* (1995a). Perhaps due to the adverse criticism with which the fictional interludes in *Dickens* were met, *Blake* is a much more orthodox biography and one that has been described by Malcolm Bull as "without doubt, the best available biography of Blake." According to this reviewer, in *Blake*, "Detailed attention to the places and people of eighteenth-century London enables [Ackroyd] convincingly to re-create Blake's environment, and his sympathetic treatment of the artist animates the book with a human warmth absent from earlier biographies" (1995: 3).

In the first chapter of *Blake*, Ackroyd explains how the poet had his first vision as "a child of eight or ten," and how he had "a strongly visual sensibility" that allowed him to create what the psychologists call "eidetic imagery," that is, "hallucinatory images that 'are always *seen* in the literal sense'; they are not memories, or afterimages, or daydreams, but real sensory perceptions." Ackroyd quotes Francis Galton, who, in the nineteenth century "noted that this faculty 'is very high in some young children, who seem to spend years of difficulty in distinguishing between a subjective and objective world'" (1995a: 34). Throughout the nearly four hundred pages of the biography, Ackroyd lovingly

draws a complex picture of William Blake, the poet and engraver who kept this childish capacity to form eidetic imagery all his life, a picture that also shows Blake the admirer of Chatterton and Macpherson (567), the antiquarian hunting "for buried tombs, stone circles and rotten foundations" (45), the spiritual radical, the advocate of sexual magic, and the Blake obsessed with ancient mythology, Masonic emblems and, in short, all kinds of ancient religions and esoteric forms of occultism; but also Blake the journeyman craftsman and artisan, Blake the Londoner who lived in the neighbourhood of Sheridan and of the genteel and artistic world of the Drury Lane and Covent Garden theatres (45), and above all, Blake the poet who "saw himself as a prophet" (269).

Of all the visionary writers Ackroyd admires, Blake is perhaps the central figure, for he was the "Cockney visionary" who managed to create "a sacred art, an art of vision rather than verisimilitude or proportion" (56) on an epic scale, through the recovery of "ancient lore and arcane myths that could be employed to reveal previously hidden truths" (58). Ackroyd notes how Blake believed in the existence of a giant race that had been dispersed over the globe, bearing with it memorials of an ancient faith and how he became heavily influenced by beliefs in the lost continent of Atlantis, of which the British Isles were the only remnant (58). Convinced that artistic imitation is the only way in which we can aspire to capture the essence of Ideal Beauty and thus catch a glimpse at Absolute Truth, Blake created a syncretic art out of the obsessive imitation of earlier texts and writers including the Bible, Spenser, Shakespeare, Milton, Chatterton, Macpherson, and many other visionary writers in the English canon, "as if the youthful Blake already felt himself to be a part of their visionary company" (60). That is, just as Nicholas Dyer in *Hawksmoor* studied the most ancient treatises on architecture in the belief that they would reveal to him the very rules that the Universal Architect had employed in the construction of the cosmos, so Blake constantly tried to find in the texts of the great artists of the past the traces of "a lost art that had flourished before the Great Deluge" (69), which would reveal to him the mysteries of human existence. As Ackroyd further notes, he called himself "English Blake" and "in his epic poems, England becomes the holy land, the seat of the ancient patriarchs and the home of the chosen race" (92, 97).

In "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1979), Eliot lays down the principle that the existing monuments of literature form an ideal order among themselves, that they are not simply collections of the writings of individuals. This idea, later developed by Northrop Frye into a theory of criticism (1957), was taken for granted by Blake, who believed that the particular forms generated by each writer in the history of literature were projections of what he called "The One Central Form" of the imagination. In a lecture entitled "Blake and London Radicalism" (1995b), Ackroyd claims that it was William Blake's visionary capacity and his allegiance to religious dissent that led him to "create a poetry and an art as intricate and as elaborate as anything to be found in Michelangelo or in Dante." Ackroyd's fascination with these aspects of Blake's art may be said to lie at the back of a deeply felt desire to create a similarly intricate and elaborate art, the expression of his own Cockney visionary sensibility. Therefore, the fact that Ackroyd should have written *English Music* precisely between the biographies of Dickens and Blake is not at all surprising, for *English Music* is Ackroyd's most visionary novel and the one in which he tries to recreate the voices and styles of *all* the English writers in his own version of the English canon, joining them in a joyous unison he calls English music, capable of expressing the essence of the "true" Cockney visionary sensibility.

In the second interlude of *Dickens*, Charles Dickens, who has been followed by Peter Ackroyd along the streets of London, turns around and confidentially tells his biographer that there is "Nothing like a street child to see the comedy of life," and that "No home should be without one [a child]. Excellent in novels, too." On which Ackroyd comments: "And I could have sworn that, when he turned towards me, he actually winked" (308). This metafictional episode surely influenced Ackroyd the flesh-and-blood novelist, for in the next novel, *English Music*, we find that he has followed Dickens's recommendation and made his protagonist, Tim Harcombe, a child who shares important biographical traits in common not only with Dickensian children such as David Copperfield, Oliver Twist, or Pip in *Great Expectations*, but also with Dickens, as well as with the child Peter Ackroyd himself was.

In novels such as *David Copperfield* or *Great Expectations* an author-narrator-character tells the story of his orphaned life retrospectively, from his childhood to his old age at the moment of the narration. In *English Music*, the odd-numbered chapters are likewise narrated by the adult Tim Harcombe, who tells the story of his past life over a span of seventy years, from his motherless childhood and youth in the 1920s and 1930s to his present in 1992, which is also the novel's present. By contrast, in the even-numbered chapters, an apparently anonymous third-person narrator tells the trance-like dreams or visions that Tim — like Dickens or Blake — has been subject to all his life, in a

way that brings to mind the alternation of narrative voices in *Hawksmoor*.

In the odd-numbered chapters the adult Tim Harcombe tells his life story from the restricted perspective of the purblind child and youth he was in the 1920s and 1930s. As a result, Tim's (and, therefore, the reader's) limited understanding of the events the child is living improves progressively along with Tim's growth (and the novel's development), while simultaneously Tim-as-adult-narrator shows his overall knowledge and understanding of past events in proleptic comments, such as: "Why he [Tim's father] chose not to send me to the elementary school in the area, *with all the unhappy consequences which followed, is no longer a mystery to me*" (49, my emphasis); or: "In this, as in so many other things, *I was to prove mistaken*" (50, my emphasis). These prolepses, with their anticipation of future events or revelations, are aimed at the reader (addressed as "you" on page 1) and their function is to increase the suspense and the reader's desire to know more.

The earliest recollections recorded by Tim in chapter 1 are of the sessions at the Chemical Theatre where his father, Clement Harcombe, who announced himself as MEDIUM AND HEALER (1992: 1), used to conjure up the spirits of the dead and to faith-heal a whole gallery of bodily and spiritually crippled people who may be said to belong to the Ackroydian generic category of tramp. As Ackroyd explains in the acknowledgments, Clement Harcombe is a character built on the figure of Daniel Home, a spiritualist medium whose séances in England in 1855 and subsequent years were attended by well-known people such as the poets Robert Browning and his wife, Elizabeth Barrett Browning. That is, he represents the kind of white magician that was trusted and respected by a large part of Victorian society, including Dickens.

The name of the hall where the seances took place, the Chemical Theatre, may be said to stand in parodic opposition to the Electrical Theatre (65), where the eidetic images and the faith-healings produced by the "chemical" transmission of the "mesmeric electric current" from patient to medium have been devalued and rationalised into "electrically [impelled] LIFE SIZE MOVING PICTURES" (69). These symbolic oppositions suggest the coexistence in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries of, on the one hand, the visionary and specifically mesmeristic and mediumistic worldview Clement Harcombe represents and, on the other, the anti-visionary rationalism of Cartesian logic. This opposition, which brings to mind a similar one between Nicholas Dyer's *Scientia Umbrarum* and Sir Christopher Wren's empiricism in *Hawksmoor*, is extended to the opposition immaterialism/rationalism

with the appearance in the novel of the philosophers George Berkeley and John Locke (and of Locke's epigone, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle). Fittingly, the Chemical Theatre was situated near "Bunhill Fields, the final home of William Blake and John Bunyan" (2), that is, in the neighbourhood of the two great visionary poets who, together with Charles Dickens, provide the most important intertexts of *English Music*.

The opposition between mesmerism and rationalism recalls William Blake's distinction between memory and vision. As Ackroyd notes, "Memory was for Blake an aspect of time and thus part of the fallen world; for him the true 'regions of Reminiscence' were visionary spaces, where he could 'behold our ancient days before this Earth appear'd in its vegetated mortality to my mortal vegetated Eyes'" (1995a: 22). Blake's spiritual process of reminiscence[1] recalls what Plato in *Meno* called *anamnèsis* or recollection, that is, a calling to mind by the soul of its previous state in the metaphysical world, where it beheld the Ideas or true Forms, as Plato calls them (or archetypes, in Jungian terminology), of what the Cambridge Platonist Henry More called *Anima Mundi*, or Great Memory, the great storehouse of knowledge that, as Yeats believed, can be evoked by symbols and passed on from generation to generation. The main difference with Plato's scheme is that Blake does not need to postulate the existence of a metaphysical World of Ideas beyond the human imagination, since for Blake the imagination itself is man's mystic or cosmic body, so that "through the imagination, we may see 'what Eternally Exists, Really & Unchangeably', 'the Permanent Realities of Every Thing which we see reflected in this Vegetable Glass of Nature'" (Liebregts, 1993: 40).

The opposition memory/vision is metafictionally reflected at the structural level: the odd-numbered chapters in *English Music* are devoted to the recovery of the past preserved in Tim's memory, that is, to the recording of the events that make up his life in this "fallen world." By contrast, the even-numbered chapters containing Tim's trance-like dreams or visions reproduce the visionary reminiscences or anamnesic recollections that Tim experienced *pari passu* to his physical development. It is by means of these memories that Tim, like Blake, should be

[1] There is a striking parallelism between Blake's spiritual process of "reminiscence" and William Wordsworth's description of the ever-diminishing capacity to "recollect" the primordial Forms or Ideas that runs parallel to the stages of growth from childhood to adulthood in "Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood." Cf. chapter 1, note 7.

able to infuse the "pictures of his childhood [with] the formal clarity and ultimate significance of all timeless things" (Ackroyd, 1995a: 22).

Another aspect of the narrative structure of the novel that can be explained in terms of Blake's ideas is the question of narrative voice. As Ackroyd points out in his biography of the poet, Blake "in his recollections [often] moves into a bright room where he can shake hands with his idealised younger self" (22). Consequently with this split between "Blake" and "his idealised younger self" — which brings to mind the characteristic self/shadow dichotomy of Gothic fiction — we can advance the hypothesis that, while in the odd-numbered chapters, the adult Tim-as-first-person-narrator recounts the memories of his past life retrospectively, in the even-numbered chapters the apparently anonymous third-person narrator is also Tim, but he is now narrating the visionary reminiscences experienced by his purblind, idealized younger self as it were from the perspective of a privileged but detached observer, who hopes perhaps to discover in them the ultimate significance of his existence.

Looking at the odd- and even-numbered chapters in sequence, with their alternation of memories and reminiscences and of first- and third-person narrative voices, it can be said that the narrative structure of the novel metafictionally reflects both the general opposition mesmerism/rationalism characteristic of the Victorian worldview, and the dual (physical and spiritual) structure of Carl Jung's description of the ego's individuation process, or, in literary and mythical terms, of the stages in the archetypal hero's quest for maturation, symbolized, for example, by the double-loop arrangement of the major arcana of the Tarot.

As Alfred Douglas (1972: 13) has explained, the major arcana of the Tarot, derived from hermetic occultism, were originally devised to represent grades or stages in a system of initiation, with each card representing a crucial stage in the Fool's journey through life. The major arcana are usually arranged in sequential order, from number one to twenty-one with the numberless card, the Fool, situated between the first and the last and forming two symmetric loops merging at the center by the superposition of cards ten and twenty-one, forming a figure comparable to the mathematical symbol for the infinite (∞), or rather to the Möbius strip, a construction that suggests infinity and a baffling reversibility and indeterminacy. This closed, though simultaneously infinite double-loop structure represents the Fool's quest for individuation in two opposed and complementary phases: the first one, from card one to ten, is outward-looking and confronts the "I" with the

"not I," the self with the world. The second phase, from eleven to twenty one, reverses this process, it is inward-looking and confronts the ego with the depths of its own psyche, seeking to establish links with the inner self, the true center of consciousness. Therefore, translating this into the structure of the novel, we could say that the odd-numbered chapters constitute the first or outward loop; and the even-numbered chapters the second or inward loop in Tim's double quest for individuation.[2]

In *English Music*, the visual emblem of the Fool/hero's quest, reproduced on page 26, is Christian, the quester in John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* who is associated, together with the Fool in the Tarot, with Damian Fall in *First Light*. His own father associates Tim with the Fool in chapter 1, when he tries to make Tim smile with the popular song: "Pack up your troubles in your old kit-bag" (15), and the chapter ends with Tim watching the illustration in *The Pilgrim's Progress* of "a man carrying a book in his hand, and a burden upon his back [which Tim] never tired of gazing at" (23). Inevitably, in the ensuing vision in chapter 2, Tim will find himself inside the pages of *The Pilgrim's Progress* in a mixed adventure with Christian and Alice (from Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*).

In Ackroyd's symbolic system, the characters who "know" are sometimes presented as clowns, (for example, Farmer and Boy Mint in *First Light* puzzlingly resemble clowns rather than peasants). This would explain why Tim, terribly depressed on discovering that his father is working as circus "Magician. And Hypnotist" (329), feels "as if I were wearing a clown's costume and had been plastered with a clown's white make-up" (329). In other words, like Nicholas Dyer, the "Old Barren One," or Damian Fall, Tim is the Fool/Clown/Christ/Magus figure on whose shoulders rests the burden of true knowledge or revelation. In line with Blake's contention that poetry and the other arts are not just a mirror to life but the chief lens of spiritual consciousness, and that the Imagination is "the first emanation of divinity," Tim's visions in the even-numbered chapters invariably are fragments of a wholly textual *Anima Mundi*, a veritable Borgesian Library of Babel, made up of the sum total of the literary, musical, pictorial, and mythical texts in English art and literature.

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[2] Another novel that neatly follows the arrangement of the major arcana of the Tarot is Jeanette Winterson's *The Passion* (1987). Cf. Onega 1993 and 1997.

By contrast, in keeping with the interpretation of the odd-numbered chapters as the record of Tim's memories of his life-in-time in this fallen world, these chapters contain the chronologically-arranged events that make up what may be described as the on the whole uneventful *physical* stages in Tim Harcombe's process of maturation. The first stage is that of his happy childhood years in London with his father in the 1920s. During these years father and son are in an intimate and continuous relationship, with Tim participating in the healing sessions and in the discussions of the spiritual world that takes place with the members of the "Harcombe circle" in their tiny apartment, which, for all its apparent drabness and poverty, is a power-concentrating place, as indicated by the splendid sunflowers that grow in its garden, symbolizing the benignity of Clement Harcombe's magic, as the faith-healer explains to his son: "they're not wild, Timothy . . . . They're trained to follow the sun. Everything follows the sun in our house" (94).[3] This period ends with Tim's unexpected removal at the age of twelve to the house of his newly discovered maternal grandparents (interestingly named Sinclair, maybe in homage to another Cockney visionary, Iain Sinclair), in a little village in Whiltshire, called Upper Harford, where Tim contemplates the English countryside for the first time, and where, after a Dickensian escape and frustrated attempt to resume life with his father, he is to remain until the age of seventeen (223), using his mother's room (another power-concentrating place). The ceiling of this room, which had been painted "dark blue with white stars in honour of my return" (329), echoes the protective star men carved on the ceiling and corners of the Mint cottage in *First Light*.

Tim learns that his mother, whom his father called "Bright Cecilia" (98), was named after "the patron-saint of music. A Catholic saint, of course" (197), and that she had died in giving birth to him. Tim passes long periods of time in her room listening to her records on her old gramophone, putting on her dresses, and playing her mandolin (112), as ways of assuaging his strong Oedipal attraction for her; he also plays with her old dog, Friday, perhaps named after Crusoe's naked cannibal, but the name is more likely an elaborate hint that Cecilia's dog is as specially gifted as she had been, for both Dickens and David Copper-

[3] Clement Harcombe's words bring to mind Chatterton, Meredith, and Wychwood, linking hands and bowing towards the sun, at the end of *Chatterton*. They also recall Turner's dying statement: "The sun is god." Matthew Palmer's mother in *The House of Doctor Dee* also has splendid sunflowers in her garden.

field were born on Friday, and Friday was for Dickens a day of omen (Ackroyd, 1990:1).[4] During these years, Tim assiduously attends St. William's School, where he develops a friendship with a badly crippled student named Edward Campion. Although Tim can read his grandfather's thoughts and has even cured his grandmother from her nervous spasms on a sudden impulse of pity (Ackroyd, 1992: 103, 111), he is on the whole reluctant to admit his psychic powers, which he attributes to his father exclusively, and he never attempts to heal Edward Campion or to boast about his powers with his school mates. This stage ends with Tim's return to London at the age of seventeen and is marked by a feeble sexual awakening and a frustrating encounter with Gloria Patterson, a beautiful but vulgar and spiteful ex-member of the Harcombe circle and currently Tim's father's mistress; she closely resembles Estella in *Great Expectations* (78). Unwilling to confess that he is an orphan and ashamed of his father's affair, Tim had told his school mates that Gloria was his mother and that she was a famous opera singer. His subsequent infatuation with her, therefore, seems to indicate that Tim has not overcome his Oedipus complex, while the fact that the humiliating episode with Gloria is the only sexual encounter with a woman Tim has in all his life may be read as evidence that the motherless and visionary child with a taste for transvestism, who, like Peter Ackroyd, was raised by his maternal grandparents, may in fact be homosexual.

On leaving Tim with his grandparents, his father wishes him: "Great expectations for you, Tim. In the years ahead" (65). However, Tim, in contrast to Pip, frustrates all his great expectations: he is incapable of securing a place at university, and has to content himself with a drab, solitary job as a guard (298) in an art gallery, where he becomes so absorbed in the contemplation of the English landscapes that at one point he literally enters a Gainsborough picture (303–22), just as Charles Wychwood enters Wallis's portrait of Chatterton in *Chatterton*. Indeed, it seems as if Tim, in the odd-numbered chapters, were sleep-walking, or rather forced to re-enact a prescribed role in an unreal and veritably Dickensian land of shadows, which, as he realizes in one of his visions, is ruled by a godlike Father/Writer figure who is dreaming him into existence (138), rather than leading a real life-in-time according to his

[4] In *The House of Doctor Dee*, Matthew's mother also has a dog, and there is a red-haired tramp with a dog, whose task, like that of Eleazar Lusher, the beaver hunter with a tame wolf in *Milton in America*, is to lead the quester's way from the material to the spiritual world.

own free will. After three years (323) of a self-absorbed and monotonous life, Tim discovers the whereabouts of his father, who, left to himself, has lost his faith-healing and mediumistic skills and, like Madame Sosostris in the *Waste Land*, has become a devalued version of his old self: a fake astrologer and illusionist in a traveling circus. At this stage, Tim gives up his job at the gallery in order to join his father as his helper, and they work together until the climactic death of Clement Harcombe with which the novel ends.

In a review of *English Music*, Michael Levenson (1993: 18) acutely notes that Ackroyd's novels are invariably pervaded by a condition he describes as "the disconnected life, the wandering soul, the anxiously floating self that knows dimly that it has been torn from some large warm body but doesn't know why, or when." Indeed, Tim Harcombe and his father, Clement, are, like earlier Ackroyd protagonists, wandering heroes who know what they are. For example, Tim's return is welcomed by his father with the words "The wanderer returns" (190), and on their way home after the sessions at the Chemical Theatre, father and son play at "'get[ing] lost' . . . . By which he [Clement] meant that we would approach Hackney Square from a different direction" (13). Tim hated this game for he "was possessed by some general dread of being abandoned" (14), and, although his father never seems to be lost in the narrow streets of London, Tim often has "the impression that we were walking quickly in order to stay in the same place" (13), that is, he feels caught up in a labyrinthine vicious circle that brings to mind the infinite yet closed double loop structure of the major arcana of the Tarot along which the Fool must travel, and which is also an apposite symbol of what Edward Campion describes as "the fallen world [where] time simply recurs" (224).

Like earlier Ackroydian characters, father and son are perfectly aware that they are inhabiting the margins of society, as Clement tells another character: "We are on the margin, Margaret. We are on the margin" (53). The apartment at Hackney Square is the center of a marginal circle of broken lives, wanderers who are narrowly treading the edge of an abysmal pit of fear and madness; a circle of awkward and solitary hollow men for whom time is a vicious circle of suffering from which they are longing to escape. Clement Harcombe, who "prided himself on being an artist" (3), tries to faith-heal these outcasts, sharing with them his vision of an alternative world, which he describes as "Music. Voices. Call it what you will . . . something larger, something of which we're all a part . . . the world where we no longer know suffering and sickness

and misery and all the things that cut us off from others. It is a world of love" (63–64).

Watching the effect of his father's words on the spiritually starved and physically ailing members of the circle, Tim realizes that they, like Kathleen, Mark Clare's crippled wife in *First Light,* are "much more at peace . . . in an alternative world than in the real one" (63). The same is true of Tim, who (like Nicholas Dyer, Daniel Fall, or Audrey Skelton) has an extraordinary capacity to feel the spirit of places and to absorb sympathetically the spiritual and physical suffering of other people; for example, walking back to school with Edward Campion, Tim finds himself limping slightly (183). When his father invokes the spirits of the dead, Tim sees them with the material clarity of Blake's eidetic imagery, and he strongly feels the heat of the mesmeric current passing through him from the patient to his father's hand during the sessions of faith-healing. Indeed, Tim's mediumistic powers are so extraordinary that, although he always attributes the healings exclusively to his father, Clement Harcombe is more and more dependent on his son as a medium, to the point that the faith-healer progressively loses faith in his own powers and, like the "ghost eater" in the ancient tribe who had eaten too many sins (151–52), feels exhausted and believes himself incapable of carrying on his work alone. As a result of his loss of faith in himself, he *does* lose his healing and mediumistic powers and does not recover them until the end of the novel, when, panic-stricken by the possibility that Tim might die, he places "the palms of his hands against the sides of my head" (366) and absorbs Tim's fever. Clement's newly recovered faith comes to a climax when he tries to heal Tim's friend, Edward Campion, who suffers from terrible spasmodic shakes. He succeeds in healing him at the cost of his own life, but not without realizing that, in Tim's words, "the power belonged to neither of us separately, but resided in the very fact of inheritance itself" (378).

The sentence is crucial for it synthesizes the core of Clement Harcombe's teachings and is the idea around which Ackroyd's concept of English music rests: namely, the conviction that the power to transcend the limitations of this fallen world does not lie in the individual, but — as Oscar Wilde, the "Old Barren One," Chatterton, Meredith, and Wychwood well knew — is rather a question of transhistorical connectedness. After the death of Clement Harcombe, Tim has a vision that strongly recalls similar visions at the end of *First Light* and *Chatterton*, when, contemplating the smiling face of his dead father, Tim unexpectedly "saw it changing wondrous wise, and taking on the lineaments of other faces which he knew." The palimpsest of faces Tim sees (like the

faces beneath that of the "Old Barren One"), reveals the Harcombe lineage stretching "back to the beginning." Tim then sees "his father rising up before him, and he felt that his father's hand took him up and bore him out of the chamber too." As his father transcends his human condition, Tim hears him say, in words that combine echoes of King Arthur and Blake: "I will come again to my kingdom, and dwell with the Britons with much joy. The old order changes, yielding place to the new, but I am eternal for I am Albion" (392–93). It is at this stage that Tim truly understands the meaning of his father's teachings and this understanding miraculously transforms him from a clownish trickster with "white make up . . . and a large false flower in my buttonhole" into a "thought-reader" and a "ventriloquist" (396), interestingly, like Clement's own father (374). That is, he becomes a genuine Cockney music-hall monopolylinguist who "soon discovered that I had an ability to 'throw' my voice in any direction I pleased . . . . Sometimes there were many voices, and the ring amazed the audience, who were as bewildered as if they had heard various spirits haunting the circus" (396). In other words, Tim has developed the capacity to reproduce the very sound of English music he used to hear in his visions and the effect on the audience is cathartic.

During Tim's childhood and youth, Clement Harcombe educates his son personally: keeping him nearby during the sessions at the Chemical Theatre and during the discussions in their flat with the members of the Harcombe circle; reading to him from the classics of English literature; and lecturing him on what he "used to call 'English music', by which he meant not only music itself but also English history, English literature and English painting" (21). As Tim further explains:

> With him one subject always led to another and he would break off from a discussion of William Byrd or Henry Purcell in order to tell me about Tennyson and Browning; he would turn from the work of Samuel Johnson to the painting of Thomas Gainsborough, from pavans and galliards to odes and sonnets, from the London of Daniel Defoe to the London of Charles Dickens. And in my imagination, as he talked, all these things comprised one world which I believed to be still living — even in this small room where we sat (21).

Tim's description of his father's lecturing method, boldly moving from one subject to another until they are all amalgamated in Tim's imagination as one world constitutes an accurate description of what Eliot would describe as the effect "tradition" has on "the individual talent";

or, in Blake's terms, of the way in which the individual artist's imagination is suffused with each earlier artist's manifestation of "The One Central Form" of the imagination. It would also perfectly describe the way in which Tim's visions are interwoven in the even-numbered chapters of *English Music*. Invariably, these *imaginative* visions are induced by and thematically linked to (as in *Hawksmoor*) some particular event or episode in Tim's *memory* that has been narrated in the previous adjacent odd-chapter, so that, after reading a particular book, watching a particular picture, or listening to his father or to some other character, Tim finds himself inhabiting the book or picture and participating with the protagonists in their adventures or talking to the artists his father had told him about, or listening to a particular musician, or more often, entering a dream that combines several episodes, characters, landscapes, and experiences lived shortly before in the external world. In chapter 2 Tim finds himself caught up in an adventure that combines *Alice in Wonderland* with *The Pilgrim's Progress* simply because, as the adult narrator explained in chapter 1, Tim's father "had begun *The Pilgrim's Progress* and *Alice in Wonderland*, reading them alternately in case I became too bored with the adventures of Alice and too fearful over the hazards of Pilgrim" (23).

Reviewers of *English Music* with a taste for intertextual reference have been elated by the wealth and variety of these visions, clogged with allusions, cross-references, and intertextual winks to pictorial, musical, historical, and literary texts in the English canon, the effect of which has been compared by John Barrell to "an unseen examination for Joint Honours in English Art and Literature" (1992: 7). The list of clear and not-so-clear intertexts Barrell gives is impressive. Yet it does not contain every character, book, picture, writer, or artist included in Tim's visions, simply because, in addition to the practical difficulty of spotting every intertextual allusion, Tim's visions are theoretically made up of fragments of the musical, pictorial, and literary texts produced by every strong writer and artist in Clement Harcombe's — and surely in Peter Ackroyd's — version of the English canon.

At the end of chapter 15 Tim hears his father recite the lines of "The Song of Albion," in which Blake describes Albion as the vision made up of "every work of Two Thousand Years" (347). Consequently, in chapter 16 Tim has a vision that takes the form of a ten-page hymn in the tradition of the eighteenth-century "progress poem," "which was used to trace the evolution of almost anything — agriculture or liberty or, in William Cowper's case, the sofa. But the subject then was often the progress of poetry itself, tracing the line of true de-

scent as it passed from generation to generation. The result was usually a narrow, fervid canon" (Klinkenborg, 1992: 143). In chapter 16, therefore, Tim Harcombe has a vision of his father's (and surely of Peter Ackroyd's) own English canon, one which includes among many others Shakespeare, Donne, Milton, Dryden, Chatterton, Keats, and Swinburne and runs from the druids, Caedmon, and Chaucer to Dr. Johnson and Ernest Dowson, a canon, that is, aspiring to reconcile the visions of "intellectual poets" and "reflective poets," the two types of poets whose sensibility had become dissociated, according to Eliot, due to the separation of thought from feeling in the seventeenth century.

The hymn, therefore, constitutes Tim's overall vision of the alternative world that Clement Harcombe has been trying to open up to his disciples and son, that the faith-healer himself enters after his death, and that Tim sees in fragmentary glimpses during his early trance-like dreams. It is a wholly imaginative textual world, which, like Borges's Library of Babel, is atemporal, self-begetting, all-encompassing, and polymorphous. It is the same textual world that Charles Wychwood, Meredith, and Chatterton joyously enter at the end of *Chatterton*, and where we left them joining their voices to those of the earlier writers in that same ineffable unison Clement Harcombe calls "English music" and that William Byrd defines in the novel as "the concordance of diverse elements in one compound by which the spiritual nature is joined with the body" (204); in other words, the music produced by Albion, the Spiritual Body of man, the human equivalent of the music of the spheres. According to Edward Campion, the vision of this world and the perception of this music provide the only release "from the cyclical nature of time in the fallen world" (224) and can only be achieved "through an act of the imagination [that] resembles the unconscious experience of the child or lovers" (224–25):

> Only through an act of the imagination can we see the archetypal form dwelling in substance . . . . Past acts or past traditions are not necessarily lost in time, therefore, because they can be recreated in the imagination: *not relived as part of the endless cycle of the generations but restored in their absolute and unchanging essence* (225, my emphasis).

Edward's words closely echo Blake's conviction that artistic imitation is the only way in which we can aspire to capture the essence of Ideal Beauty, and, therefore, catch a glimpse of Absolute Truth, while the concept of "English music" itself recalls Blake's attempt to create "a sacred art of vision rather than verisimilitude or proportion" through the recovery of "ancient lore and arcane myths that could be employed

to reveal previously hidden truths" (Ackroyd, 1995a: 56, 58). His contention that the imagination can restore the absolute and unchanging essence of past acts or past traditions brings to mind Yeats's conviction that "the epic vastness of time and space could be found in the condensed 'little and intense' poem, in which life and the supernatural are concentrated to the utmost degree, thus suggesting the 'epic design' in the shortest way possible" (Liebregts, 1993: 62). According to Liebregts, Yeats takes up this idea from Walter Pater's analysis of the Mona Lisa in *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873). As Liebregts points out, in Yeats's view, "While Da Vinci was painting the portrait, he charged the picture with many suggestive associations and made the image of the woman the sum of all the thoughts and experiences of the world" (62). That is, Edward's words evoke the symbolist tenet that the perfect work of art constitutes a whole universe, complete in itself. The harmonious combination of the elements in the well-made symbol produces a unique effect that goes beyond the denotative power of the words that constitute it. This effect, which Eliot called "the music of poetry," is only achieved at certain moments when a word can be made to insinuate the whole history of a language and civilization. It could, therefore, be concluded that *English Music* is a novel that aspires to produce not just "the music of [Ackroyd's] poetry" but rather "English music," a novel, in sum, that aspires to the category of objective correlative of the Cockney visionary sensibility at large.

The fact that this English music should exclusively be made up of the voices of white male English writers has been denounced by some critics as politically incorrect (Lurie, 1992: 7) and as presupposing a vision of English culture that is "entirely patrilineal [and] racial" (Barrell, 1992: 7). For Michael Levenson it constitutes a clear "anti-Euroculture statement" in the face of "both the Maastricht treaty for a federal Europe and the erupting claims of rival ethnicities" and shows how Ackroyd's instinct is "to recall (or to imagine) a pure nation that was [and whose] identity develops inside a language, which unfolds inside a tradition, which bears the ancient traces of a nation" (Levenson, 1993: 32). However, as the author himself points out in "London Luminaries and Cockney Visionaries" (1993a), the concept is not "one exclusive inheritance [but rather] an open sensibility which is continually being regenerated. The city has to a large extent been created by successive generations of immigrants, from the Huguenots to the Bangladeshis . . . . And that of course is the true strength of an old city . . . . It is strengthened at the same time as it strengthens those who become

part of it." Certainly, Ackroyd's definition of the canon ignores important ideological questions, such as the validity of the concept itself. However, what is important for our purposes is the realization that Ackroyd's concept of English music is necessarily made up of the styles and voices of his own strong predecessors and that it therefore has the shape of Peter Ackroyd's imagination.

In keeping with the circularity of myth, the novel begins and ends in the present, with Tim wondering "whether I was an old man still or whether I had become a child again" (Ackroyd, 1992: 1), that is, wondering whether he has recovered his childlike visionary capacity. The fact that he has developed from clownish trickster to thought-reader and ventriloquist may be read as evidence that he has succeeded in his endeavor and that he will eventually manage to join his father in the atemporal and ineffable World of Art, adding his own voice to the voices of the writers in the English canon. However, the fact that Tim's contribution to this canon should be nothing other than the novel that we have in our hands at the same time shows Timothy Harcombe as Peter Ackroyd's unfree literary character, trapped within the textual prison of language, forever writing himself into existence in an endless round of textual reincarnations. In other words, Tim, like earlier Ackroydian heroes, is left at the end of the novel attempting to transcend his human condition, but he is only capable of doing so in the imaginative terms prescribed by William Blake, that is, as a mere imaginative act. Therefore, our willingness to grant him success in his attempted transcendental escape depends exclusively on our own imaginative capacity to accept the reality of the fictional world created in *English Music*. The novel ends with Tim teaching Edward Campion's granddaughter Cecilia the mysteries of reincarnation, with the hope that his vision will be received by this new "Bright Cecilia," yet the survival of English music really depends on the possibility that the music produced by the book should be heard and transmitted by a new generation of (English) readers.

Ackroyd's next novel, *The House of Doctor Dee* (1993b), shares with *English Music* the same conception of art and history. The novel begins when the twentieth-century narrator-character, Matthew Palmer, inherits from his father an old house in Clerkenwell that had belonged to Doctor John Dee, the most famous magician in London during the reign of Elizabeth I. The house of Doctor Dee, like the churches built by Nicholas Dyer in *Hawksmoor*, the prehistoric tumulus unearthed in the Dorset countryside in *First Light*, and the Marshalsea Prison in *The Great Fire of London*, still holds the concentrated power of its earlier

inhabitants. When Matthew Palmer moves into the house, he experiences a series of uncanny events; as a result his character is altered, his sensual drives heightened, and he is seized by an obsessive desire to know more details about its earlier owner.

Historically, John Dee (1527–1608) is a complex and controversial figure who may be said to represent the quintessence of the Renaissance magus. He was extraordinarily gifted at mathematics but was also deeply interested in astrology, alchemy, natural magic, and the Cabbala, thus developing the reputation of "conjurer" that would cost him four years of imprisonment during the reign of Mary Tudor on the grounds that he had "endeavoured by enchantment to destroy Queen Mary" (Ackroyd, 1993b: 37). However, he had been the tutor of Elizabeth's favorite, the Earl of Leicester, and, on her accession to the throne, he was released from prison and became the center of a flourishing circle of courtiers that included Leicester himself, Edward Deyer, Walter Raleigh, and Sir Philip Sidney; Dee eventually achieved the position of First Astrologer to the Queen. The fact that Ackroyd should have chosen this Renaissance magus as the subject of his next novel after *English Music* is significant in the sense that Dee's thought and activities are now beginning to be considered as of transcendental importance for the shaping of the intellectual and political panorama of the European Renaissance.[5] As Luis R. Munt (1992: 12) has pointed out, Dee was one of the principal promoters of the idea of a British Empire, and he propounded a philosophy that was a synthesis of the methods of Hebrew Cabbala, Alchemy, Hermeticism, and the various Neoplatonist currents inherited from the Middle Ages, with a strong mathematical basis (76–67) that, according to Frances A. Yates (1972), anticipates the Rosicrucian enlightenment of the early seventeenth century.

Appalled by the destruction of the ancient manuscripts and rare books kept in Catholic monasteries that had taken place during the reign of Henry VIII, Dee spent his life gathering together in his mansion by the Thames at Morlake what was to become one of the most important libraries in Europe. This library, which was always open to scholars and travelers, was a constant source of suspicion for his detractors. In 1597, as Francis King notes: "During one of Dee's absences abroad, a crowd, incensed by his reputation as a "conjurer" or master of the black arts, set fire to this mansion, destroying many of the

[5] Another pointed example of Dee's growing popularity would be Claude Postel's historical novel, *John Dee, le mage de la ruelle d'or* (1995).

rare and valuable books contained in it" (1993: 27). The Morlake mansion, however, survived, and Dee was to die in it, poor and persecuted, in 1608. This is the house that Ackroyd moves to Cloak Lane in Clerkenwell in *The House of Doctor Dee*, and this is the fire with which the novel ends.

Following the pattern established in *Hawksmoor*, *The House of Doctor Dee* alternates two stories and periods: the one told by Matthew Palmer is set in 1993, the year of publication of the novel (Ackroyd, 1993b: 219); the other, narrated by Doctor John Dee, is set in the sixteenth century. The alternation of Matthew's and Doctor Dee's accounts is structurally enhanced by the fact that only Matthew's chapters are numbered from ONE to SEVEN while Doctor Dee's chapters, eight in number, simply have chapter-headings. To these a last, atemporal chapter is added, "THE VISION," narrated by the combined voices of Matthew Palmer, John Dee, and Peter Ackroyd.

As in earlier novels, the thematic connection between the first four chapters reported by Matthew Palmer and the first four narrated by Doctor Dee are structurally echoed by the device of repeating the closing sentence of the earlier adjacent chapter as the opening sentence of the next chapter. Thus, while chapter ONE ends with Matthew's words: "but for a moment I seemed to see the dark shape of a man soaring upward above Cloak Lane" (19), the next chapter, "THE SPECTACLE," begins: "What became of the flying man?" (20). Likewise, this chapter ends with Doctor Dee's words: "It was a clear night, and the fixed stars were all I needed to light my path to Clerkenwell" (38), while the next, chapter TWO, begins with Matthew's words: "I decided to walk through the night" (39). This concatenation of adjacent chapters is kept until chapter FIVE, in which the ending — "It was, then, I suppose, that I began to pity my father" (180) — is not related to the beginning of the next chapter, "THE CHAMBER OF DEMONSTRATION," but rather to the beginning of chapter SIX: "I decided to go through my father's papers" (219). The ending of chapter SIX: "But how could the dead speak?" (258), is linked to the beginning of chapter SEVEN: "So who in this world can make the dead speak?" (258). Similarly, the ending of "THE CHAMBER OF DEMONSTRATION" — "Look upon the world without love" (205) — is not linked to the next adjacent chapter, but rather to the beginning of the following chapter narrated by Dee, "THE CITY": "Now, look upon this. Look upon the world without love" (205). And its ending — "Now look upon this, and see the world with love" (246) — to the beginning of "THE GARDEN": "Now see the world with love"

(147). These parallel concatenations are stopped at the end of "THE GARDEN" and again at the end of chapter SEVEN, thus separating the last chapter "THE VISION" structurally from the rest. Schematically the sequence would be as follows:

ONE > < *THE SPECTACLE* > < **TWO** > < *THE LIBRARY* >
< **THREE** > <*THE HOSPITAL* > < **FOUR** > < *THE ABBEY* >
< **FIVE** >
[{*THE CHAMBER OF DEMONSTRATION*} {*THE CITY*}]
< **SIX** >
[{*THE CLOSET*} {*THE GARDEN*}
<**SEVEN**>
[*THE VISION*]

After inheriting the house, Matthew discovers that his father, a superstitious Catholic (8), had been an active member of the John Dee Society "for years and years" (258), during which time he had gathered important material on "Elizabethan England's greatest magus" (131). Interestingly, the twenty-nine-year-old narrator is equally attracted by the Elizabethan period: he is currently carrying out a piece of research on Elizabethan costume for a theatrical company (5) and his only friend, Daniel Moore (whose name brings to mind both Daniel Harcombe in *English Music* and Henry More, the seventeenth-century Cambridge Platonist and hermeticist so much admired by W. B. Yeats), is also a professional researcher (12) who, like Matthew, is "at odds with the rest of the world," for, as he explains: "we are travelling backwards, while all those around us are still moving forward" (13).

Daniel's words bring to mind Ackroyd's conviction that we must master the past in order to understand the present. But they also provide the reader with a strong clue as to how the structural alternation of narrative voices and periods should be understood, for the further Matthew seems to be traveling backward in the course of investigating Doctor Dee's life, the further Doctor Dee seems to be traveling forward into the future. From the start Matthew feels his spirit suffusing the house and invading his dreams, and he even hears his voice in the "sealed up" chamber talking with his assistant, Edward Kelley (229), while, conversely, Doctor Dee hears fragments of Matthew's conversation with Daniel in the "scrying room" (188), and the reader often has the puzzling feeling that Matthew and Doctor Dee are involved in similar actions or episodes, as, for example, when Doctor Dee sees a dead pigeon with a single wing in his cat's mouth (159) and Matthew

breaks a pigeon's wing and kills it in a fit of rage (136). More puzzling still, Matthew and Doctor Dee have striking biographical traits in common: both allow their parents to die without a word of comfort or love; both unjustly hate the women in their family; both are aloof and solitary, men who prefer study to human company. They feel equally ill at ease with London, which they describe using similar images. For Matthew, the city has "grown steadily larger by encroaching upon, and subduing the energy of its inhabitants" (48); while for Doctor Dee it is "a Leviathan" (62). Indeed, they share a similar obsession with recuperating the past, in Matthew's case, Doctor Dee's life and work; in Doctor Dee's case, the mythical founders of London.

The first time we meet Doctor Dee in "THE SPECTACLE," he is involved in the construction of a "flying man" for a gentleman called Nathaniel Cadman. Although he is aware that "to the world [I am] but a street juggler, with all my knowledge no more than a cozening art" (30) (a statement that brings to mind Ackroyd's recurrent equation of visionaries with clowns), Doctor Dee's construction of the flying man and other automata — a flying wooden dove; an Aristophanes scarab; a wooden fly; a beetle of iron; and an artificial eagle (21) — in fact shows his mastery of "mechanic" or natural magic, the kind of magic that seeks to dominate the material world through the control of the *corpus mundi*, the fundamental structure or system of relations underlying matter.[6]

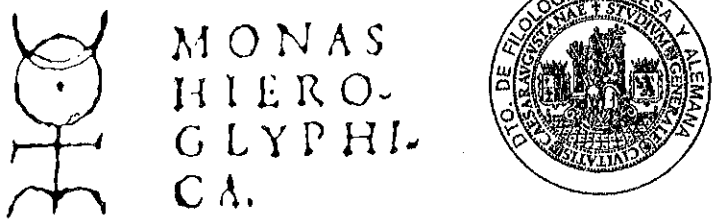
For the Renaissance magus the world was divided into three levels: the sublunary (whose fundamental structure is called the *corpus mundi* or system of matter), the intelligible (whose fundamental structure is called the *anima mundi* or system of principles), and the angelic (whose fundamental structure is the *mens divina* or system of ideas). The fictional Doctor Dee refers to these levels as "elemental, intellectual and celestial" (65). Man, considered to be the microcosmic equivalent of the macrocosm, that is, a whole world on a small scale, has a similar ternary constitutive structure: body, soul, and spirit. If properly used, the *nous*, or intuitive capacity, would allow man to penetrate the interior of these systems of relations and to perceive and even control the emanation of the *mens divina*, called the *spiritus mundi*, the universal and unique substance underpinning the perceptible accidents of existence, which are only appearance. In Matthew

[6] Doctor Dee's activity brings to mind "the Mechanic Theatre, or Androides, in Norfork Street," the real theatre where William Blake might have seen "a miniature automaton of a boy" (Ackroyd, 1995a: 125).

Palmer's words: "Each material thing is the visible home of a universal power, or congregation of powers, and it was the task of the enlightened philosopher and alchemist to see these true constitutions" (133).

The construction of Doctor Dee's automata is based on these ideas. First, the magus reproduces the form of the chosen living creature in wood or iron, and then he infuses it with life by the manipulation of its *corpus mundi*: "So do we cause the material residues of the earth to quicken and stir itself beyond the confines of its proper sphere" (21). In other words, at this stage Dee knows how to manipulate the *corpus mundi*, but does not yet hold the secret of the *mens divina*, the secret of God's creation *ex nihilo*.

The historical Doctor Dee learned natural magic and built automata during his University years at Cambridge. But he was soon to abandon this practice in favor of the Cabbala, which, in contrast to natural magic, seeks to raise the magician above the natural powers of the cosmos and aspires to achieve God's creative capacity. In the Jewish magical and mystical traditions, the creation is conceived as a code that can be deciphered and reproduced. Doctor Dee applied these principles in his most influential book, the *Monas Hieroglyphica* (1564), in which he represents the complex unity and wholeness of man (man as microcosm) with the symbol of the "hieroglyphic monad." This symbol combines the *ternarivs* (body, soul, and spirit) with the *quaternarivs* (the four basic elements: earth, air, water, and fire) to form a *septenarivs*, which hides the "most secret" *octonarivs* (Theorem VI, 12), the overall symbol of the complex unity of the monad, or, in alchemical terms, the "philosopher's stone." Doctor Dee's diagrammatical representation of the hieroglyphic monad is as follows:[7]



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[7] Figure from *Monas Hieroglyphica Ioannis Dee, Londinensis, ad Maximilianum, Dei Gratia Romanorum, Bohemiae et Hungariae Regem Sapientissimum.* Guliel. Silvius Tupog. Regius, Excud. Antwerpiae, 1564. Reprinted from Luis R. Munt's reproduction of the original Latin text: Luis R. Munt, ed., *John Dee. La mónada jeroglífica,* versión directa, introducción y notas, Barcelona: Ediciones Obelisco, 1992

Doctor Dee believed that man can aspire to a spiritual transmutation or essential change — in Carl Jung's terminology an ascesis — through which he could transcend the world of matter and ascend to the world of the spirit. However, this change can only be induced by the separation (or decoding) of the four basic constitutive elements (often symbolized by colors), with the help of what he called "igneous art," mentioned by one of the spirits who speaks with Kelley in the novel as *Ignis vera mater* (202) and described by the fictional Doctor Dee as "the seven alchemical doors, calcination, fixation, solution, distillation, sublimation, separation and projection" (77).

The separation of these elements, what the fictional Doctor Dee calls "The loosening of the chains of each element in this elemental world" (77), could also be used for the creation of an artificial man, what the fifteenth-century physician Paracelsus called a *homunculus* (or, in cabbalistic terms, a *golem*), as is suggested by Dee's vision of "the creature that is born twice, crying out upon the top of a mountain and saying, "I am the white of the black, and the red of the white, and the yellow of the sun, I tell truth and lie not" (51).

In 1659 Meric Casaubon published *A True and Faithful Relation of what passed for many years between Dr. John Dee . . . and Some Spirits* . . . . This book contains the documents relating to private sessions with angelic beings held at Morlake mansion by the historical Dee and his "scryer" Edward Talbott, a notary whose dubious reputation had led him to change his name to Edward Kelley (Munt, 1992: 15). In the prologue, Casaubon condemns the activities of Dee and Kelley as the product of diabolical magic, and, although Kelley could not have been involved in the murder of Katherine Dee as he is in *The House of Doctor Dee* (the historical Dee's wife died several years before Kelley and he met) there seems to be historical evidence that Kelley was a crook and a spy, who might have been sent by Dee's enemies to keep a watch on his activities.

It is with the help of his disreputable scryer that the fictional Doctor Dee undertakes two main tasks: The first one is "to find our forefathers" (Ackroyd, 1993b: 191), "the race before the Flood, who [were] not giants of physical but of spiritual power" (190) and whom he believes to be the founders of the lost city of London. This task recalls William Blake's belief in the existence of "a giant race which had been dispersed over the globe, bearing with it memorials of an ancient faith" (Ackroyd, 1995a: 58), and also the myth of the lost continent of Atlantis (Ackroyd, 1993b: 66, 155 and passim), of which the British Isles were considered to be the only remnant. As Doctor Dee explains to

Kelley, the city is "more than three thousand years before our present age, when there was such power upon the earth that all men were like gods" (190), and it is clear that the city Doctor Dee has in mind, like Blake's Albion, Bacon's New Atlantis, or Saint Augustine's *City of God*,[8] is a mystical city, "formed within the spiritual body of man" (273), for, in common with "Pico della Mirandola and Hermes Trismegistus," Dee believes that self and world are one and the same: "to be myself is to be the world, to look into myself is to look into the world, to know myself is to know the world" (68). The contemporary equivalent of this search is embodied by a secondary character, Dan Berry, who believes with Swedenborg that "after death, the human being is taken to the society where his love is," and, consequently, he goes every day to the National Archive Centre in order to trace the names of "the people who had been like himself. Who had felt the same things" (90, 91).

The second task is related to the first. It consists in discovering "the divinity within, that soul, that spark, that fire which drives the spheres" (104), that is, the discovery of the *spiritus mundi*, God's creative spark existing in all things. In the fictional Doctor Dee's words:

> The stars do live and, through the *spiritus mundi* influence us; there is sympathy or disharmony between all living things, and to gain mastery over this point is to exercise control over the entire world . . . . What is above also lies below, what is below is also above . . . the sun, gold and the heart of man are analogous. If I control the light and the heart's passions, then I can begin to discover or refine the material substance of gold (77).

The search for this unitary and essential substance (what the alchemists called the philosopher's stone) is what drives the covetous crook Edward Kelley to offer himself as Doctor Dee's assistant and scryer. As the quotation makes clear, Doctor Dee himself was at first most interested in minting gold, and his obsession with material wealth was such

[8] Saint Augustine's version of the mystical city, like those of Blake or Bacon, combines mythical and Catholic traits: "In Augustine's work the history of the world is conceived in terms of . . . two cities, the city of the world and the city of God, distinct but not entirely separate, together experiencing 'the vicissitude of time.' The heavenly city exists within the earthly city, in separated individuals or in communities of believers, so that it is possible to see within the fallen city — let us say, London — 'an image of the Heavenly City.' . . . The city of the world could aspire, at least, to the condition of the city of God" (Ackroyd, 1998: 102).

that he even abandoned his father on his death-bed in order to search for a supposed buried treasure (102). However, he soon understands the fruitlessness of this pursuit and abandons it in favor of the spiritual aspect of alchemy, which, we must not forget, is the art of "mint[ing] gold both material and spiritual" (189). Henceforth Dee will concentrate his effort on the task of creating "new life without the help of any womb . . . an everlasting creature" (104).

After moving into the house, Matthew finds in Doctor Dee's study a glass tube that later disappears and is replaced by some sheets of paper with "DOCTOR DEE'S RECIPE" for the creation of a *homunculus* (123). His gardener also finds a ring of bones at the bottom of a small pit in the garden, which might belong to a dead dog or cat, but which, to Matthew's imagination, seems "the remains of a child" (122). At the same time, Matthew is troubled by his incapacity to recall anything about his early childhood (174, 176), and the more he learns about his father's involvement with Doctor Dee's magical practices, the more he puzzles about the question of his origins. Therefore, when his mother tells him that he was not her biological son, that: "He found you. He adopted you. He said that you were very special. Unique" (177), her words haunt Matthew and the reader alike with the disturbing possibility that Doctor Dee's experiment may have been successful and that Matthew, the twenty-nine-year-old narrator, may in fact be a *homunculus*, who "will grow and prosper until its thirtieth year when it will fall asleep and return to its first unformed state" (123) in order to be reborn again.

The historical Dee believed that angels and demons existed in a different dimension but that it was possible to contact them in specific spaces that functioned as "doors." He believed that one such geographic space was Greenland, known then as the land of Thule. Another was Glastonbury, the ancient borough in Somerset associated with King Arthur and the Holy Grail, where the historical Dee is supposed to have searched for the Elixir. The fictional Doctor Dee and Kelley likewise consider Glastonbury "the most ancient seat of learning in the entire kingdom, where, it is said, the giants who originally inhabited this realm had placed their secrets" (145). They also look for the site of the ancient city of London in the Wapping marshes (where Matthew's father owns a garage). Another example of a connecting door between different dimensions is the "small globe of clear glass" (165) that they use to propitiate the passage of the angelic beings from the spiritual world to that of matter, which they believed to be "some token from the lost and ancient city of London" (153). Yet another is

the sealed door in the basement of Doctor Dee's house that, nevertheless, sometimes opens of its own accord (14). But it may be said that Doctor Dee's house as a whole is a huge transdimensional door, as suggested by Matthew's uncanny experiences in it and by his vision of himself entering the house for the first time and opening four different doors:

> It had four doors, the first of which was black, the second was white and as transparent as crystal, the third was green, and the fourth red. I opened the first door, and the house was full of black dust like gunpowder. I opened the white door, and the rooms within were pale and empty. I opened the third door, and there appeared a cloud of water as if the house were a fountain. Then I opened the fourth door, and I saw a furnace (910).

The black, white, green, and red colors of the doors are the alchemic colors of the *quaternarivs*, that is, of the four basic constitutive elements: earth (dust); air (pale and empty); water (cloud and fountain); and fire (furnace). As we have seen, the spiritual transmutation of man can only be achieved through the separation of these elements, and the house, which is literally "descending into ground" (5), has three storeys (at underground, ground, and above-ground levels) that may be said to replicate the *ternarivs* or cosmic levels and also their human equivalents, body, soul and spirit. This equation is explicitly made by Matthew when he states that the central section "resembled the torso of a man rearing up, while his arms still lay spread upon the ground on either side . . . it was as if I were about to enter a human body" (3).

In his *Testament*, Doctor Dee cryptically refers to a "stone which 'has been left here for those that may find it'" (227). This hidden stone is the *octonarivs*, the most secret element in the hieroglyphic monad, constituted by the stone steps that lead down to the sealed door in the basement (14). We may conclude, therefore, that the house, shaped like a human body with outstretched arms, is a striking example of the *monas hieroglyphica*, the materialization of Doctor Dee as cosmic man or *anthropos*. In this light, Matthew's offhand remark that "I was becoming part of the old house" (44) enhances the suggested doppelgänger relationship between Matthew and Dee, while, from a Swedenborgian perspective, it refers to his belonging to Doctor Dee's "spiritual family."

But the house is much older than Doctor Dee. As Matthew notes, it "was not of any one period" (2). It is situated at the geographic center

of London (1); on the site of a "medieval brothel . . . just beyond the nunnery" (17), that is, at the crossroads of good and evil; and also near the twelve-century-old "Clerks' Well," considered to be an emblem of spiritual blessing (16). The centrality of the place, then, its dual good/evil nature, its association with regenerative water, and its three-storey structure all confirm the house's condition of *umbilicus/axis mundi*, that is, of being the navel/center of the world (like the three "houses" in *First Light*).

In this light, the symbolic correspondences between Doctor Dee's house and the "lost and ancient city of London" are striking. In the chapter entitled "THE CHAMBER OF DEMONSTRATION" an angelic being describes this city along the same lines: "there are four natural keys to open five gates of the city (for one gate is never to be opened), and by their means will the secret of this place be righteously and wisely granted to you" (193). In other words, Doctor Dee's house is both the microcosmic replica of cosmic London and its center. But we should not forget that the house is also a hieroglyphic monad, the emblem of cosmic man, and that the mystical city of London only exists within the "spiritual body" of the English, so that the house is also the navel of the cosmic body of the English race. This condition is made evident by the fact that since Doctor Dee's death the house has always been inhabited by craftsmen associated with London radicalism. Such would include members of the "London Meeters of Clerkenwell" in 1662 (220), of the "little congregation of God's Brotherhood" in 1762 (221), of the "London working Men's Union" (221), in the nineteenth century, and, in the early twentieth century, a creative writer tormented by the anxiety of influence (222–23), who might be Abraham Crowley, the man from whom Matthew's father bought the house on 27 September 1963, the day of Matthew's birth (219). Indeed, this name fittingly synthesizes the kind of visionary Londoner who is attracted by the house and the kind of faith that prospers in the area, as it combines the names of Abraham Cowley (1618–1667), the Restoration Cambridge scholar, writer and Royalist (that is, Catholic) spy, with that of Aleister Crowley (1875–1947), the son of a rich brewer turned Plymouth Brother, known as a diabolist and as a bad but prolific poet, who became a member of the Order of the Golden Dawn, the group of theosophists involved in cabbalistic magic to which W. B. Yeats also belonged.

After the arrival of Kelley, Doctor Dee's progress in his occult knowledge improves dramatically. However, this improvement does not seem to increase his happiness or spiritual bliss. In fact, the more he

trusts Kelley and the spirits raised by cabbalistic means, the more doubts he entertains about whether they are angelic or satanic beings (187) and the more unjust and unloving he becomes, making the members of his household unhappy. At this point two family ghosts help him to reevaluate his art by means of two complementary visions: "THE CITY" and "THE GARDEN." In the first, Dee will be offered a vision of the world created by cabbalistic magic; in the second the hermetic (or also Swedenborgian or radical) alternative to it.

In contrast to the cabbalists, the Renaissance magi who followed the hermetic tradition had a strong vitalist character. Marsilio Ficino strongly contended that love is the force that drives magic. In one of the most beautiful passages in the *Corpus Hermeticum* (1463: I, 14), Man and Nature unite themselves in a passionate embrace, for they are burning with love for each other.[9] For the hermeticist, it is the human capacity to love that unites man with the cosmos and allows him to participate of the Totality and to bring about his transcendental change.

Doctor Dee's father had died in "an alms-house and hospital for the aged" (94), neglected and unloved by his son. Consequently, it is the ghost of his father who offers John Dee the fearful vision of "THE CITY," or of what he calls "the world without love" (204). In this vision, human beings appear as Eliotean hollow men (205), love becomes *amor sexus* (203), and London eternal acquires "the image of a man mounting a woman and coupling with her in a rape" (206). It is a city of sorrow, separation, and darkness, a world of corruption and sickness in which Doctor Dee, condemned to death for the poisoning of his wife, witnesses his own hanging and, in a subverted version of his transcendental ascesis, walks down the "new stairs" by Watergate (210) that would take him to the barge where a Charon who looks exactly like himself will carry him to hell (211). Hell is presided over by Elizabeth I, who tears to pieces and greedily consumes a naked corpse that is both Doctor Dee's body and that of England (215–16), in a plastic image of the cause/effect relationship existing between man's evil actions and the death of his spiritual body. As a further example of this effect, Doctor Dee is then transposed forward to his own house in the twenti-

[9] "When the man saw in the water the form like himself as it was in nature, he loved it and wished to inhabit it; wish and action came in the same moment, and he inhabited the unreasoning form. Nature took hold of her beloved, hugged all about and embraced him, for they were lovers" (Copenhaver, 1992: 3).

eth century and allowed to see how his lovelessness has projected itself into the future, as he contemplates "a man and a woman lying quite naked upon the floor" (218), surely Matthew and Maria, the prostitute Matthew has just beaten, defiled, and raped in the same corner of the basement where "Daniel and my [Matthew's] father performed their own [sexual] rituals" (172). Indeed, in the world without love, women "all in white" are not archetypal "virgins" (168) but "whores" (169). Needless to say, the scene Dee watches echoes his own defilement of the prostitute called Marion on the day his father died (116–21). Worse still, Dee's evil actions seem to have set a recurrent pattern. Matthew's father also seems to have been fatally influenced by Doctor Dee's evil practices and to have projected his lovelessness onto Matthew, for, as he reflects: "I had grown up in a world without love, a world of magic, of money, of possession, and so I had none for myself or for others" (178). Doctor Dee's vision of the world without love fades with the ghost's warning: "This was a vision of the world without love, John Dee, but one you yourself have fashioned. You hoped to create life, but instead you have made images of death" (218).

Doctor Dee is so deceived and misled by Edward Kelley that he does not realize until too late how much his wife Katherine loved him and how faithful and dutiful his servants were. It is only after Katherine dies that he truly understands the extent of his blindness. In a deathbed scene suffused with romantic echoes, Katherine promises to return after her death, and she does soon after, in order to show her husband a different road to wisdom, not the "total knowledge" of the cabbalist that creates *homunculi* and a world without love, but rather the *docta ignorantia* of the hermetic magus and of the radical craftsman: "You have read in vain and done nothing but lose time. Now understand something which will be more profitable to you by far: this world is your own self, John Dee . . . . Once you saw the world without love. Now look upon this, and see the world of love" (246). In "THE GARDEN" we share with Doctor Dee the vision of this world. The separation, darkness and suffering of "THE CITY" have given way to a beautiful and placid vision of "the philosopher's garden, which is normally closed with such locks and bars that no one may enter" (247). In this lovely *hortus conclusus* Dee sees his mother/wife pregnant with "a man child" (245) who, like Doña Inés for Don Juan Tenorio, has offered her soul to God as pawn for his sins (251). It is in the light of this perfectly unselfish motherly/wifely love that Doctor Dee is allowed to contemplate the "spirit of beauty" burning "with a quenchless flame, like a blazing beacon, or like a sparkling torch" (252) within the flowers, and "men and women set for dancing" — like the peasants in "Burnt Norton" (Eliot, 1974: 189–90) — each one with his mate, "the humane beings who have taken the true path of life" (255). He then sees that these men and women form "a pattern of people in perfect order and symmetry" (256) and realizes in amazement that "the Star Man" he has always sought to create is within himself and that "he cannot be found by experiment or speculation. He proceeds from virtue and has so noble a nature, by the divine infusion of goodness, that where he takes root he rises beautifully and brings forth an everlasting fruit" (256). After this vision of the world of love Doctor Dee, in a Prospero-like gesture,[10] abjures his art and his search for the *homunculus* and realizes, like earlier Ackroydian characters, that "There is no way to conquer time and live eternally except through vision. The vision, not the body, transcends this life" (270).

Almost simultaneously with this revelation, Matthew Palmer undergoes a similar numinous experience. However, before reaching it, he suffers a series of cathartic experiences that run parallel to the progress of his research on Doctor Dee. He discovers, for example, that Daniel, who is writing a history of London radicalism (45), including "a group of radicals who used to dress up as a protest against Old Corruption" (82), has himself a taste for transvestism; that he has been the lover of Matthew's father for years; that both believed (with Blake) in "sexual magic," that is, in the capacity to "raise the spirits by means of sex" (261); and that they had in fact practiced it in the Clerkenwell house. He also eventually discovers that his mother had tried to protect him from sexual abuse at the hands of his father as a child (177), and that Daniel's friendship was not the product of hazard, but the result of his father's scheme to protect Matthew after his death. The discovery of these facts in turn changes Matthew's bad opinion of his mother (just as Doctor Dee eventually corrects his bad opinion of his wife), as he realizes that "I had never looked *at* her properly. I had never tried to understand her life . . . . I had never bothered to love her" (174) and that his "father had slowly destroyed her, just as surely as if he had fed her poison" (177) a telling simile, if we recall that Doctor Dee did nothing to prevent Kelley from poisoning his wife Katherine.

Matthew is hit by "the first wave of feeling" and senses that something "had risen within me" (181). That is, just as Doctor Dee is saved by the love of his wife, so Matthew's spiritual barrenness is overcome

[10] Prospero has been thought to reflect John Dee (Yates, 1977: 357).

with the help of his mother, whose closeness to the world of love is symbolized by the splendid sunflowers growing in her garden (178–79) — like those of Clement Harcombe in *English Music* — and by the fact that she has a dog (180) — like "bright Cecilia," Tim's visionary mother in *English Music* — and also a partner, Geoffrey, whom she insists on calling "the lover": "a very ordinary man [with] an awkward, diffident manner" (8), whose job "as surveyor for the development of an eastern 'corridor' into the city" (179) links him with the old tradition of London radicalism. Indeed, Geoffrey, who significantly has just found "a buried city . . . somewhere between Wapping and Shadwell" (179), perfectly embodies the cornerstone of radicalism, the belief that: "The humblest person can be filled with grace. Divinity is within us, and there is no sin. There is no heaven, no hell" (46).

Before reaching this turning point, Matthew's spiritual barrenness is comparable to that of Doctor Dee. Like Nicholas Dyer, Dee is acutely aware of the fallen condition of life-in-time (103); he feels "surrounded by . . . much great anxiety and grief of mind, [is] frightened by the darkness within [his] own mind," and has a clear sense of being caught "within the net of demons who govern time" (103). Doctor Dee's magical practice, therefore, is aimed at dispelling his "terror of mutability," which he expresses, in purely Ackroydian terms, as a "panic fear [of] becoming no more than a wanderer like the vagabond I had found in my garden" (101). The wanderer Dee alludes to is "a man in a threadbare black coat," who unexpectedly appears in Doctor Dee's garden. He introduces himself as Philip Jennings, calls London "Romeville," speaks in "some ancient tongue of the country" unknown to Dee, and offers him some ancient-looking "papers of close writing" (70, 71). The fact that he wears black (like Dyer and Dee) symbolizes his condition of black magician (or, in the novel's context, of cabbalist), a symbology enhanced by the fact that he suffers from "the falling sickness" (68), or epilepsy, the illness of oracles and seers.

This human remnant of mythical London seems to share Doctor Dee's capacity to move across time. Matthew is shocked by his unexpected appearance on two occasions. On the first, the man "seemed to be tying his shoelace, when suddenly . . . he hurled himself sideways as if he were trying to knock me violently to the ground. But nothing happened. He had melted away, or somehow *melted into my own body*" (11, my emphasis). On the second, he addresses Matthew: "'Hello, my little man,' he whispered, and then he knelt down before me" (265).

Matthew and Dee also encounter on several occasions (263–65, 267, 272) another vagrant, a tramp with a dog, who, like Dee's scryer, Edward Kelley (144) (and like other wandering visionaries in the earlier novels), has red hair, signifying his condition of white magician or star man (or, in the novel's context, of hermeticist, or radical). This symbology is enhanced by Doctor Dee's nickname "Doctor Dog" (28), which points to the inseparability and reversibility of good and evil — that is, God/Dog, or Nicholas Dyer's equation of *daemon* and *theos*, and Tertulian's of *exacramentum* and *excrement* — made explicit by Doctor Dee's father's recommendation to "love my dog," and Dee's retort "Do you love dog or god?" (106). It can, therefore, be concluded that the vagrant with the black coat constitutes the black (cabbalistic, or satanic), and the red-haired tramp with the dog the white (hermetic, or celestial) facets of Doctor Dee's emanation, which have traveled forward into the future to reincarnate themselves in Matthew Palmer. They are competing for preeminence over his heart just as they did before with the earlier inhabitants of the house, including Matthew's father. However, the house itself is much older than Doctor Dee, who himself has imbibed from the house the spirit of earlier inhabitants whose roots go back to the mythical origins of London and the names of the four druids whose symbolic marks had been scratched above the lintel of the sealed door in the basement: "Sunsfor," "Zosimos," "Gohulim," and "Od" (134–35). From this perspective, the epileptic wanderer and the red-haired tramp may be said to embody the millenary, black-and-white emanations of a long line of Londoners whose roots go back to the origins of England.

In his *Testament*, Doctor Dee cryptically states that he left a stone "for those that may find it" (227). Matthew eventually finds this stone in the small locked-up garage his father had in Wapping. When he arrives at the garage, the tramp with the dog is waiting for him "at the side of the field" (263), and when he enters it, he finds "a large piece of stone [that] seemed to emit a vague glow" that is actually caused by "patches of moss and lichen which spread across its surface" (263). On closer scrutiny he notices that the stone has the form of three steps, like the stairs Doctor Dee had gone down to take Charon's barge in his vision of hell, but also like the steps that lead down to the sealed door in Doctor Dee's house. In the garage, however, the steps lead nowhere and make Matthew realize that "up and down are the same here" (264). This apparently banal realization synthesizes, however, the core of Hermeticism, the belief that the way to Hell and Heaven is one and the same (God/Dog). Climbing up, Matthew — like Mark Clare in the center of the tumulus in *First Light* — feels dizzy and, climbing down, "had so strong a sensation of vertigo that I might have been descend-

ing miles into the earth" (264). Indeed, it seems that Matthew has finally found the *octonarivs* itself, the most secret, overall symbol of the hieroglyphic monad, the very transdimensional "door" or Jacob's ladder to heaven left by Doctor Dee "for those that may find it" in his *Testament*, which he rubricates with the sentence: "Follow my footsteps beyond the grave" (226).

After this uncanny experience Matthew returns to the Clerkenwell house, where he unexpectedly encounters "an unformed creature perched upon the gate" and realizes that: "There never was a homunculus," that it was only "a figment and a sick man's dream . . . the fantasy of those who believe in the reality of time and the power of the material world" (266). This realization amounts to Matthew's anagnorisis and is comparable to Doctor Dee's abjuration of his occultist art, symbolized by the fire that scorches the stone steps and burns every book in the house except Katherine's Bible (271). Once Matthew decides to follow Dee's "steps" and get rid of the shackles of the material world, the spatio-temporal barriers collapse, "the veil" (6) is torn and the sixteenth- and the twentieth-century characters can meet at last in the transdimensional realm of the imagination.

After abjuring his art Doctor Dee undertakes a last journey to the Wapping marshes, where he had so often sought in vain for the remains of the mythical city of London. This time, however, Dee does not undertake any kind of action, but rather decides to wait. And, just as Sir Gawain found the Holy Grail at last, by renouncing all action and sitting still, so Doctor Dee will be granted his transcendental change: "I stood there for an eternity, until I had changed and became someone other. Something was breaking within me, and I believe that I wept" (272).

The city that now opens its gates to Doctor Dee is a beautiful, harmonious, and holy city, where "time never was" (272) and where the tramp with the dog who is leading the way is "no longer solitary walking, but exists in all things" (272). As the tramp makes clear, "this city is formed within the spiritual body of man" (273). It is in this spiritual city/body, built by Doctor Dee's passionate love that he is met by his dead father and wife who "took me by the hand and greeted me" (273). But it is also here that he will encounter Matthew Palmer and Peter Ackroyd, together with "the Moravians of Arrow Lane, the Ranters, the followers of Jakob Boehme . . . . Mary, in her leather coat; Nathaniel Cadman; Margaret Lucas; Daniel Moore; Katherine Dee; and so many others, all of them living within the city" (276); that is, he will encounter here the real and the fictional human beings who share

the same imaginative vision of the world, for as Swedenborg taught, "each of us goes to a house, and to a family — not the same ones we possessed on earth, not them at all, but to the house and the family that correspond to our ruling passions. Whatever we wished for on earth we shall find after death" (90).

As in earlier novels, linear temporality gives way to circularity in the last chapter of *The House of Doctor Dee*: a conversation between Matthew and Daniel that had taken place in chapter ONE "About a year ago" (17) is repeated and situated again "About a year ago" (273) in "THE VISION." In this conversation, Matthew is telling Daniel Moore about the vision he had of "a bridge of houses. A shimmering bridge, lying across the river . . . a bridge of light . . . . connecting two shores" (17–18, 273). This bridge is the transdimensional door into the holy city of London opened by Matthew's love. On this bridge, he simultaneously meets the adult Doctor Dee and sees their shared pregnant mother/wife announcing Doctor Dee's reincarnation in Matthew: "although you live again within him, he will not recognize you except by repute. Yet, it may be that he will find you, even as he tries to find himself" (274), while at the same time we hear the voice of Peter Ackroyd, merging with that of Dee/Matthew, worrying about the historical accuracy of his recreation of the sixteenth-century magician, in a way that brings to mind the metaleptic interludes in *Dickens* and also the early twentieth-century writer tormented by the anxiety of influence who had lived in Doctor Dee's house: "And what is the past, after all? Is it that which is created in the formal act of writing, or does it have some substantial reality? Am I discovering it, or inventing it? Or could it be that I am discovering it within myself?" (275). Indeed, in the bright world of the imagination opened by this bridge, Matthew/Dee/Ackroyd can lose their individuality and join their voices (like Chatterton, Wychwood, and Meredith, or like Tim and Clement Harcombe) in the mystic union of man's spiritual body, which "exists eternally" (276).

The novel closes with Ackroyd's exhortation to Dee to "become one with him" and help him to "create another bridge across two shores," so that London might be redeemed and become "the mystical city universal" (277). His exhortation brings to mind the cabbalistic belief that man's creative power is inferior to that of God either because of an intrinsic feebleness or because of his sinful nature, so that even Abraham, the reputed founder of the Cabbala, could only create worlds (or *golems*) in association with his master, Sem. In the "Berakhot Treatise" in the *Talmud* this idea is beautifully expressed when it is stated

God can create in three dimensions (Couliano, 1990: 4). With these ideas in mind, it is tempting to equate Ackroyd's task as writer/creator in the two-dimensional world of paper and ink with that of Doctor Dee, the godlike creator of three-dimensional *homunculi* and *anthropoi*. And, if we compare the novel with John Dee's symbol of the star man, the *monas hieroglyphica*, we will be surprised by the neatness of the structural correspondences between the chapter distribution in the scheme above and that of the monad's constitutive elements. The division of the first eight chapters into four pairs alternating the voices of Matthew and Dee can be said to correspond to the arrangement of the four elements of the *quaternarivs*. The intertwining of chapters FIVE, SIX, and SEVEN may be said to correspond to the three elements of the *ternarivs*, which, combined with the four last chapters narrated by Dee ("THE CHAMBER OF DEMONSTRATION," "THE CITY," "THE CLOSET," and "THE GARDEN") form a *septenarivs*, leading to the last, transdimensional, and atemporal chapter, "THE VISION," which, like Dee's *octonarivs*, is most secret and difficult to fathom, as it only exists within the spiritual body created by Matthew/Dee/Ackroyd in conjunction with the earlier visionary writers and characters in the English tradition.

Thus, making good the Behemites' belief that "the universe itself was in the shape of a single person" (45), *The House of Doctor Dee* shows its hidden condition of hieroglyphic monad and reveals itself as a two-dimensional yet infinite Self/Textual World, the materialization of the spiritual body of a series of living creatures who can be seen either as *homunculi* or as *anthropoi*, as literary characters or as historical figures. Like the mythical Book/City they inhabit and jointly beget, their nature strictly depends on the reader's capacity to find and follow the steps left by Matthew/Dee/Ackroyd "for those that might find [them]."

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that man can only create in two dimensions, drawing images on paper, while only God can create in three dimensions (Couliano, 1990: 4). With these ideas in mind, it is tempting to equate Ackroyd's task as writer/creator in the two-dimensional world of paper and ink with that of Doctor Dee, the godlike creator of three-dimensional *homunculi* and *anthropoi*. And, if we compare the novel with John Dee's symbol of the star man, the *monas hieroglyphica*, we will be surprised by the neatness of the structural correspondences between the chapter distribution in the scheme above and that of the monad's constitutive elements. The division of the first eight chapters into four pairs alternating the voices of Matthew and Dee can be said to correspond to the arrangement of the four elements of the *quaternarivs*. The intertwining of chapters FIVE, SIX, and SEVEN may be said to correspond to the three elements of the *ternarivs*, which, combined with the four last chapters narrated by Dee ("THE CHAMBER OF DEMONSTRATION," "THE CITY," "THE CLOSET," and "THE GARDEN") form a *septenarivs*, leading to the last, transdimensional, and atemporal chapter, "THE VISION," which, like Dee's *octonarivs*, is most secret and difficult to fathom, as it only exists within the spiritual body created by Matthew/Dee/Ackroyd in conjunction with the earlier visionary writers and characters in the English tradition.

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DE FILOLOGÍA INGLESA Y ALEMANA

4: *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem* and *Milton in America*

THE ACTION OF ACKROYD'S NEXT NOVEL, *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem* (1994), shares many traits in common with *The House of Doctor Dee*: it is situated in the East End; the name of one of the main characters "John Cree," is phonetically close to "John Dee"; and, as the title suggests, it is about a Golem, the Jewish equivalent of Doctor Dee's *homunculus*. But *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem* also has important elements in common with *Hawksmoor*. Described by Peter Keating as "a modern pastiche of the Victorian Shilling Shocker" (1994: 21), it develops around a series of mysterious ritual murders, one of which takes place near St. Anne's, one of the churches that form the septilateral figure in *Hawksmoor*. Finally, it shares with all the earlier novels an interest in the music-hall tradition that Ackroyd links with the birth of a "specific London sensibility" (Ackroyd, 1993a).

Formally, *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem* is presented as the report of an anonymous twentieth-century narrator/historian who has been gathering material about two sets of murders committed in Limehouse in 1880: one is a "private" and "domestic" case, typically Victorian, according to Gissing (36): Elizabeth Cree's poisoning of her husband, an ex-newspaper reporter with a passion for the music hall and fascinated "by poverty, and by the crime and disease which it engendered" (44). The other, the "shocking" and "public" massacres of several representatives of the margins of Victorian society: two prostitutes, a Jewish scholar, and a whole family of second-hand clothiers, is attributed by the press to an invisible "Limehouse Golem."

The narrator/historian, in an apparent desire for historical accuracy and truthfulness, reproduces extracts from the trial of Elizabeth Cree kept at the "*Illustrated Police News Law Courts and Weekly Record*" (9); he also includes extracts taken from "*the Diary of Mr John Cree . . . now preserved in the Manuscript Department of the British Museum*" (24), in which John Cree attributes the Golem murders to himself. Interspersed with these "historical" records are also some chapters in which Elizabeth Cree retrospectively narrates her life story. This account may be the one mentioned by Mr. Lister, the lawyer acting for Elizabeth's defence at the trial, as "your account of your early life" (130), so it may

be assumed that it also forms part of the trial documentation. In this account, Elizabeth Cree confesses a whole new set of undetected murders that run parallel to the stages of her own transformation from a poor and illegitimate child to music-hall comedian, respectable married woman, and the true Limehouse Golem.

In his review of the novel, Peter Keating notes that: "The Golem murders are very obviously based on those of Jack the Ripper, but they are dated eight years earlier, and no mention of the Ripper is ever made" (21). In fact, as we shall see, only the murders of the first three victims, Jane Quig, Solomon Weil, and Alice Stanton (5–6) anticipate, rather than follow, the pattern of the Jack the Ripper murders of prostitutes that historically took place during the "Autumn of Terror" of the year 1888 in Whitechapel, that poverty-stricken area of East-End London that E. W. G. Chick has called "the evil quarter mile" (1995: 21). Interest in this extraordinary case was increased by the discovery of a diary, allegedly written by a Liverpool businessman named James Maybrick, who claimed to have been Jack the Ripper. As Chick explains, "Mrs Maybrick was charged in 1889 with his murder. She was tried and found guilty by Mr Justice Stephen, father of J. K. [one of the suspects of being Jack the Ripper]" (22).

It is easy to see the parallelism between Mrs. Maybrick's trial and that of Elizabeth Cree and between the Maybrick diary and the diary allegedly written by John Cree, who, like Maybrick, came from a line of prosperous businessmen (256). Whether James Maybrick or his wife was the authentic author of the diary, and whether he or she was the real Jack the Ripper has never been elucidated. A similar doubt plagues the reader of *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem* until chapter 49, in which Elizabeth Cree confesses: "Well, I made up a diary and laid the guilt upon him" (273).

In the chapters narrated by the twentieth-century external narrator, the account of events includes reactions and commentaries on the murders by a series of historical characters who lived in the area, such as Karl Marx and George Gissing, who, like Dan Leno (269), Oscar Wilde, and Bernard Shaw (139), often sit next to each other in the Reading Room of the British Museum. The attraction these historical characters (and also fictional characters such as Solomon Weil and Elizabeth and John Cree) feel for the British Library is explained by the narrator as evidence that for many a Londoner, "the Reading Room was the true spiritual centre of London where many secrets might finally be revealed" (269).

The external narrator reports Gissing's observation that magical societies and occult bookshops seemed to spring up in the vicinity of the British Museum and its great library. This idea, also expressed by Ackroyd in "London Luminaries and Cockney Visionaries" (1993a), brings to mind Iain Sinclair's belief that the Hawksmoor churches form a magic pentacle and that the British Museum (together with Greenwich Observatory) is one of the two major sources of occult power in London: "the locked cellar of words, the labyrinth of all recorded knowledge, the repository of stolen fires and symbols, excavated godforms . . . . So many spectres operate along these fringes: Yeats in the British Museum, at the time of the Ripper murders, researching into Blake — Blake & Newton, polar opposites" (1975: 5–6). With Sinclair's words in mind it is easy to draw a parallel between Yeats's researching Blake at the time of the Ripper murders and the twentieth-century narrator researching the Limehouse Golem murders, while the "polar opposites" George Gissing and Karl Marx sit side-by-side in the Reading Room of the British Museum unknown to each other, but equally worried about the "condition of England."

In 1880 Dickens had been dead for ten years, but the desperate conditions of the poor he had denounced in his novels had not improved. Late Victorian London was acutely suffering the effects of overpopulation and the inhuman working conditions that came in the wake of the second wave of the Industrial Revolution. The prevailing social and economic philosophy of this period was based on Adam Smith's economic philosophy of the free market and on Malthus's theories on population. In the hands of Jeremy Bentham and David Ricardo these theories were integrated into Utilitarianism, an economic and social philosophy that justified the application of Malthus's "iron laws of wages" by appealing to Darwin's theory of natural selection. For Malthus and Ricardo, wars and natural disasters such as pestilences were considered necessary natural controls, which, in addition to the many miseries and vices like alcoholism that afflicted the poor, would check the growth of the population and thus prevent the inevitable universal famine predicted by Smith's economic theory. The application of these ideas materialized in an Industrial Revolution whose success entailed the suppression of all restraints to economic benefit and the maintenance of unemployment and of inhuman working and housing conditions for the poor. Its moral justification was provided by the Calvinist-Evangelical emphasis on personal salvation and on the conviction that poverty was ordained by God. No wonder, then, that Carlyle and Dickens should attempt to find their own humanitarian alternatives to

the condition of England. Still, the critics agree that Dickens's novels, like Tennyson's poetry, show a characteristic hesitation between involvement in social matters and withdrawal to the confines of their own privacy. This hesitation, which Chesterton called a "splitting headache," is represented in *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem* by George Gissing, the writer and newspaper man who, in 1880, at the age of twenty three, married Nell Harrison, a seventeen-year-old alcoholic prostitute whom he romantically hoped to rescue from the gutter (Ackroyd, 1994: 111). This altruistic marriage synthesizes Gissing's rejection of Utilitarian values and his allegiance with the romantic idealism of writers such as Burke, Coleridge, and Scott. In contrast to the mercantilist, profit-making materialism of Utilitarian political economy, these writers defended the altruism, individualism, and emotionalism of the idealist tradition and proposed the transformation of the Utilitarian Economic Man into The Ideal Working Man, "happily" protected by the inevitable reintroduction of the feudal system. This pervasive but ineffective outlook on society suffuses the mid-Victorian period before the Marxist phase, which began in the 1880s.

In the novel Gissing is described as an "individualist [who] placed no faith in those who considered that urban poverty could be miraculously removed or even alleviated. He knew enough of London to realize that its condition was irredeemable" (120). Still, his attitude to the Industrial Revolution is contradictory. He is fascinated and repelled by Charles Babbage's Analytical Engine (the forerunner of the contemporary computer), which he romantically sees as the mechanical equivalent of the Golem (or, it might be said, of Frankenstein's monster), the product of a "vision of the world, in which all phenomena were notated and tabulated; it had been conjured up like some golem here, in Limehouse, among the disease and suffering" (120).

At the end of the novel Gissing gets lost in a maze of narrow lanes in the heart of an industrial London that brings to mind Dickens's Coketown in *Hard Times*, and, coming across a ghostly "manufacture" shrouded in clouds of smoke, he sees a long line of women workers who look as if they "might have been proceeding up and down the staircase for eternity, as they slowly sang in unison" (245). Reflecting on this vision, Gissing finds the traces of "perpetual, infinite London . . . in him and in each of the people he had encountered that night" (246) and understands at last that "nothing need be lost," that it was "as if the air indeed were one vast library, one great vessel in which all the noises of the city were preserved" (246).

Gissing's justification of the evils of industrialization and his acceptance of suffering in romantic or visionary terms, as part of the atemporal and unchangeable pattern of human existence, is diametrically opposed to Karl Marx's views on the condition of England. Marx and Engels's revolutionary theory rejected the Utilitarian and the Romantic models alike in favor of the abolition of private property and its redistribution among the community. However, in the novel, John Cree, who is sitting in the Reading Room precisely between Gissing and Marx, observes that Marx was "dividing his attention between Tennyson's *In Memoriam* and *Bleak House* by Charles Dickens" (45). On another occasion, he notes on passing by his desk that Marx had just purchased a novel entitled *Workers of the Dawn* (84), surely George Gissing's first novel, *Workers in the Dawn*, published in the spring of 1880 (112). In other words, thirteen years after writing *Das Kapital* (1867), Marx seems to be oddly interested in the escapist or vague alternatives to Utilitarianism offered by humanist, romanticised literature and, as the narrator explains, even is "once again contemplating the composition of a long poem, which was to be set in the turbulent streets of Limehouse and entitled *The Secret Sorrows of London*" (45).

Marx also seems to be increasingly interested in discussing his own points of view with Solomon Weil, a cabbalist scholar who also frequents the British Library. As the external narrator explains, Weil is an expert in "Hasidic lore" (5), that is, in the occult knowledge of medieval German mystics known to have used "the Cabalistic power of the Hebrew alphabet . . . to create 'a golem'" (Irwin, 1991). Like Doctor Dee, Weil has "a large library of cabbalistic and esoteric learning" (64). Interestingly, "many of the books in his collection had once belonged to the Chevalier d'Éon, the famous French transsexual,"[1] whose interest in the Cabbala was largely due to its "emphasis upon an original divine androgyny from which the two sexes sprang" (64). Also among Weil's books are the "writings of Richard Brothers, the visionary and British Israelite who believed that the English nation represented the lost tribe of Israel" (65); while his passion for the popular theatre of London has led him to acquire "a collection of sheet music [with] the newest songs from the halls" (65). Indeed, the books in Weil's library

[1] Peter Ackroyd devotes several pages to the Chevalier d'Éon in *Dressing Up*. According to the writer, "He is the most famous transvestite in European history and . . . has become so closely associated with the phenomenon that Havelock Ellis suggested that cross-dressing be described as 'eonism'" (1979: 77).

may be said to contain all the elements needed to unravel the mystery of the Golem murders: the myth of the creation of a human being by means of words; the myth of original androgyny; and the myth of Britain going back to a lost race of divine origin. Solomon Weil believes, as Peter Ackroyd explains in *Dressing Up* (1979: 97–98), that at the end of the nineteenth century all these myths survived in displaced form in the burlesque transvestism of the comic theatre and their wisdom survived in the popular songs and ballads.

Weil and Marx, the occultist magus and the anticapitalist atheist, may be said to represent the polar opposites of Judaism. After meeting by chance in the Reading Room, they develop a friendship based precisely on the disparateness (or rather, complementarity) of their worldviews. They soon find that they have a similar Jewish-German background, "a similar interest in theoretical enquiry and subtle disputes of learning," and also, implausibly, that they had been born "in the same month and year" (63). Indeed, as the German pronunciation of the "w" in "Weil" ["*v*eil"] suggests, Marx and Weil may be said to stand in a doppelgänger or "shadow" relationship (similar to the polar opposition existing between Gissing and Marx), with the magus and the atheist representing the opposite yet complementary extremes of the Jewish philosophical tradition. This explanation would be in keeping with the central article of faith of a mid-eighteenth-century Cracowian sect of Jewish gnostics mentioned by Weil, who believed that "The malevolent spirits of the lower air could sometimes divide a departing soul into two or three 'flames' or 'flashes', so that the elements of the same person might be distributed into more than one body of the newly born" (95).

Weil had mentioned this sect in the course of a conversation that, whether by sheer coincidence or as an example of prescience on Weil's part, was taking place "while Jane Quig was being mutilated" (68) and had started with a discussion of the Golem. For the cabbalist magus the ancient legend need not be taken literally, but rather is to be understood allegorically, as an emblem of degraded matter: "We give it life in our own image. We breathe our own spirit into its shape. And that, don't you see, is what the visible world must be a golem of giant size" (68). For Weil, therefore (as for Doctor Dee), self and world are one and the same, and the shape of the material world necessarily takes the form the human spirit gives it. This notion is essential for an understanding of the structural relationship between *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem* to *The House of Doctor Dee*, for if the *homunculus* was the microcosmic evil emanation of Doctor Dee's house and "a figment and

a sick man's dream" (Ackroyd, 1993b: 266), the Limehouse Golem may be described as the macrocosmic evil emanation of the whole area of Limehouse and a figment of the dream of sick Londoners.

What the sickness is can be gauged by the kind of murders and the type of victims the Golem chooses. The murders of Jane Quig, Solomon Weil, and Alice Stanton are performed according to some kind of esoteric ritual with clear sexual connotations reminiscent of the Ripper murders. As the external narrator explains, the first murder took place in Limehouse Reach, "an ancient lane which led . . . to a flight of stone steps just above the bank of the Thames" (4–5). The body of Jane Quig "had been left upon the old steps in three separate parts: her head was upon the upper step, with her torso arranged beneath it in some parody of the human form, while certain of her internal organs had been impaled upon a wooden post by the riverside" (5). The flight of stone steps recalls the ancient stone steps by the riverbank in *The House of Doctor Dee*, and the three parts into which Jane's body was severed is reminiscent of the three-level division of the hieroglyphic monad. The same ritual is made explicit in the description of Alice Stanton's body, which "was mutilated in a manner reminiscent of the killing of Jane Quig nine days before" (6). Solomon Weil's body is also strangely mutilated: "his penis and testicles had been left upon the open page of a book . . . decorating a long entry on the golem" (6). That is, they had been arranged in a crude imitation of the cabbalist formula (a mixture of blood, semen, and words) for the creation of a golem.

Among the many hypotheses entertained about the Ripper murders, there was one that had great hold among the Victorians. It was the conviction that the killer must be a foreigner, since, according to Dr. Stanley, "brutality in the shape of bloodthirsty hacking was an aggravation for which English society declines to be responsible" (Borowitz, 1995: 15). The foreigners under suspicion were the Jews living in Old Jerusalem, the Jewish quarter of Limehouse, comprising "three streets beyond the Highway" (5) where Solomon Weil used to live. As the Golem explains, the death of Solomon Weil was a mistake, the simple product of hazard: the Golem had initially wanted to kill Karl Marx, whom it wrongly assumed to live in Weil's house. However, within the logic of Solomon Weil's belief that each human being creates his or her monsters, the mistake becomes a case of poetic justice, for Weil believed that the Golem was a symptom of London's spiritual illness, and Weil was the only person equipped to lead the way to the Golem. What is more, from the point of view of the Golem, the identity of the victims is immaterial, for, as Marx explains to Chief Inspector Kildare:

"The Jew and the whore are the scapegoats in the desert of London, and they must be ritually butchered to appease some terrible god" (92).

In his contribution to *Who Was Jack the Ripper?*, Iain Sinclair refuses to speculate on the identity of the murderer and quotes Aleister Crowley (the Satanist and member of the Order of the Golden Dawn whose name is suggested by that of Abraham Crowley in *The House of Doctor Dee*), who contends that:

> the topography of the Whitechapel murders spells out a magical formula, conferring "the gift of invisibility" on the initiate responsible for directing the slaughter. The assassin's curse would then be to remain forever present, unseen by those who search for him. Jack is so much there that he merges with the stones, the moss, the grid of future streets. (1995: 73).

These words echo Solomon Weil's theory that the Golem is the emanation of London's spiritual sickness. They also bring to mind Ackroyd's theory of the existence of intangible "patterns of habitation, and patterns of inheritance which seem to emerge from the very streets and alleys of the capital" (1993a), and help explain why the deaths of Jane Quig, Alice Stanton, and Solomon Weil seem to follow the pattern of the Ripper murders even though they were perpetrated eight years earlier: from a mythical perspective, the question of chronology is immaterial, for time is cyclical and human actions are endlessly accumulated and repeated around the same power-concentrating places.

Apart from the ritual murders of the city's scapegoats, the "whores" and the "Jew," the Limehouse Golem also murders the Guerrard family. This massacre closely follows the pattern established by another Victorian massacre, the John Williams murders of the Marr family — also called the Ratcliffe Highway murders — of 1812, which were raised to the category of "awful" art by Thomas De Quincey in his essay *On Murder Considered as One of the Fine Arts* (1827). George Gissing published an article on it, "Romanticism and Crime" (Ackroyd, 1994: 112), in which he celebrates De Quincey's ability to transform the bright yellow-haired butcher into a "wonderful Romantic hero . . . a poet of sublime impulse who rearranges (one might say, executes) the natural world in order to reflect his own preoccupations" (37). Needless to say, the Golem sees its murderous work in this romantic light, and De Quincey's essay is discussed by George Gissing, Dan Leno, Elizabeth Cree, Karl Marx, and Chief Inspector Kildare, who have either read, or are on the point of reading it.

The parallelisms between the Guerrard and the Marr families — already suggested by the phonetic closeness of Gue-*rrar*d and M-*arr* — are carefully drawn by the Limehouse Golem: the only reason why the Guerrards were chosen as victims is that they lived in the same house that the Marrs were massacred in. Interestingly, the Guerrards had continued the Marrs' business, although on a diminished scale. Marr "kept a little hosier's shop" (De Quincey, 1926: 84); while Guerrard, who "had once been the 'dresser' of Dan Leno" (Ackroyd, 1994: 164), is a second-hand clothier. In both cases the serial murders were committed during the night; they were carried out with a mallet (Ackroyd, 1994: 160 and De Quincey, 1926: 75–87); and, each time one female member of the household survived: Mary, the maidservant of the Marrs (De Quincey, 1926: 86); and Guerrard's sister, Peggy (Ackroyd, 1994: 163). That is, we can say that the two families are linked by what Ackroyd would call a double "pattern of habitation" and of "inheritance." In this sense, the fact that John Cree's father (another of Elizabeth Cree's victims) should also be a hosier (256) is also significant, as is the fact that John Cree should have married a music-hall comedian who, like Dan Leno, specialized in crossdressing.

After finding the mutilated body of Alice Stanton wearing a second-hand riding outfit that had belonged to Dan Leno and had been bought at the Guerrards' (201), police detectives fear that "the Limehouse Golem might have been trying to kill Dan Leno himself, and was approaching him through these surrogates" (201). In other words, the police are aware of the relationship between the murder and the victim's outfit and even establish a connection between the murderer and Leno, but they cannot understand its meaning. Chief Inspector Kildare even associates this murder with the scene in which Dan was nearly strangled on the stage by a killer he took for a male actor. But, a diminished Sherlock Holmes who thinks smoking a pipe will help him "cogitate" but does not (257), Kildare does not take up Leno's clue when he tells him that "It was a she" (204). The Chief Inspector is also puzzled by the artificiality of the murders: "Everything is very messy and very theatrical" (205), but he dismisses the impression "as too fanciful" (201). By contrast Dan Leno seems to be aware of the true nature of the massacres, not only because he can identify with the victims through empathy — "as he recited the verse, he experienced the horror of the Guerrard children for a moment" (206) — but because he even seems to know the identity of the murderer: "I think you [Peggy, the Guerrard survivor] saw the shadow of a woman along the Ratcliffe

Highway" (208). Still, he believes that there is nothing to be done but wait: "the badness will pass in time" (206).

Elizabeth's evolution from illegitimate child to serial murderess was caused by the brutal and evil physical and psychological treatment she was subjected to by her mother. The daughter of a reformed prostitute turned Methodist bigot (12), Elizabeth may be considered as a living emblem of the Dickensian orphan deprived of its romantic halo. Or rather, she is the emblem of the monsters bred by Utilitarian mercantilism and Methodist repression in the slums of London, or, in Doctor Dee's terms, the monsters created by the "World Without Love": "I was my mother's only child, and always an unloved one" (11). The walls of the dingy room where she lived with her mother were literally covered with pages torn from the Bible. In the literal sense, then, her eventual metamorphosis into the Golem was brought about by the manipulation of holy words: the words that catch her eye just before leaving her mother to die alone after having poisoned her, refer both to Abraham, the earliest creator of golems, and to Lazarus, who was called back from the dead: "Father Abraham have mercy on me and send Lazarus" (14). From then on, the stages in her transformation from child to monster will invariably follow the murder of a relative or acquaintance. The poisoning of her mother (50) brings about her first transformation from "Little Lizzie" into "Lamberth Marsh Lizzie," the "innocent" (101) female music-hall character.

Her second metamorphosis is linked to another murder, that of Little Victor Farrell (102), who had tried to molest her. Elizabeth describes this second "change" in terms of death and rebirth: "Of course, in a manner of speaking, I had died. My old self was dead and the new Lizzie, Little Victor's daughter with the rotten cotton gloves, had been born at last" (106). It is at this point that Elizabeth starts talking in the third person about her new character (as real transvestites often do) and feels her personality to be divided: "It was as if I had some other personality which walked out from my body every time I stood in the glare of the gas, and sometimes she even surprised me with her slangster rhymes and cockney stuff" (106). So, while Elizabeth behaves like an innocent and virginal girl, her new character "began to perform a burlesque medley of the Bible with the most wicked patter about David and Goliath" (107). Her transformation is comparable to that of Dr. Jekyll in *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, the novel written by Robert Louis Stevenson in 1886, for both Elizabeth and Dr. Jekyll start assuming their alternative personalities at will but progressively

lose control of them until their evil personalities take complete hold of their good ones.

Indeed, Elizabeth's transformation into music-hall comedian involves a process of alienation and fictionalization that is absolutely different from Leno's. While at the age of fifteen Dan Leno had already "played so many parts that he hardly had time to be himself. And yet somehow, *he was always himself*" (108, my emphasis), Elizabeth progressively alienates herself from her hated "real" personality: she tries to improve it by inventing a "history which made me much more interesting to myself" (107), and she tries to bury her past beneath the fictional lives of one character after another.

After three years, she "grew sick of Little Victor's Daughter. She was just too sweet, and I longed to kill her off by some violent action" (150). It is then than she decides to put on Leno's male clothes and become "The Older Brother" (151). This is her first transsexual impersonation, and she describes it as a birth (152). Again, she refers to The Older Brother in the third person (152). As happened to Dr. Jekyll, her female personality is soon overtaken by that of her male impersonation, and she feels the urgent need to walk the streets at night in male outfit. She does not hesitate to kill her roommate, Doris, when her secret is discovered (155) and, after this murder, her instincts (like those of Mr. Hyde) become more and more irrepressible: she nearly strangles Leno during a performance (183), and she flogs "Uncle" Tommy Farr (Leno's agent and Elizabeth's former protector) to death after several sessions of sado-masochism (184–86), just before leaving the stage and converting to Catholicism in order to marry John Cree.

Peter Keating, in his review of the novel, notes that "we are told that Dan Leno was born on December 20, 1850, and that, 'curiously enough', this was also the birthday of Elizabeth Cree, one of the main fictional characters in the novel. 'In fact', Leno was born exactly ten years later" (1994: 21). Keating does not see any reason why Dan Leno's career should be so "inexplicably compressed, and this, in turn, occasionally distorts his 'fictional' relationship with Elizabeth Cree." The manipulation of the birthdates of Dan Leno and Elizabeth Cree points to the existence between these characters of a polar opposition similar to that existing between Gissing and Marx, or between Marx and Weil. Weil himself gives a clue as to the nature of this relationship when he explains to Marx that the halls and little theatres are sacred places built on the sites of earlier chapels and churches (68), and that Dan Leno impersonating "Sister Anne" in *Bluebeard* is not "the shadow female. It is male and female joined. It is Adam Kadmon, The

Universal Man" (67). Indeed, from a mythical perspective, Dan Leno, the (historical) male transvestite impersonator of Sister Anne, and Elizabeth Cree, the (fictional) female transvestite impersonator of Bluebeard, may be said to stand in a doppelgänger relationship, with Dan Leno embodying the comic or "white" emanation, and Elizabeth Cree the tragic or "black" emanation of "perpetual, infinite London" (246). This "shadow" complementarity is made explicit by a Hebrew passerby who, almost colliding with Elizabeth Cree dressed as The Older Brother, "just by the Limehouse church, . . . muttered something like 'Cab man' or 'Cadmon'" (154).[2]

This mythical interpretation is consistent with the Golem's remark that the real protagonist of the Guerrard massacre is London: "To die on the same spot as the famous Marrs — and to die in the same fashion — why, it is a great testimony to the power of the city over men" (160). It would also give sense to the puzzling fact that some of the murders committed by the Limehouse Golem in 1880 seem to *follow* the pattern established by the Jack the Ripper murders of 1888, even though they antedate them. The Golem murders absorb the John Williams murders and anticipate the Ripper murders as they form part of an ever-growing cyclical pattern of horror materializing out of the suffering of the inhabitants of that deprived and degenerate area of Victorian London. This interpretation would be compatible both with Marx's contention that: "Murder is part of history, you see. It is not outside history. It is the symptom, not the cause, of a great disease" (93), and with Solomon Weil's belief that the world always knows "what we need, or expect, or dream of, and then it creates such things for us" (69).

When Elizabeth was a little child, her mother used to "pinch it [a place between her legs] fiercely, or prick it with her needle, in order to teach me that it was the home of pain and punishment" (13). This act of brutal sexual repression is at the core of Elizabeth's transformation into the Limehouse Golem and explains both her utter frigidity and the ritual mutilations she inflicts on some of her victims. Although she married John Cree, she never allowed him to have sexual intercourse with her. After the timely death of his father of "gastric fever" (in fact, Elizabeth's poisoning of him) "just at the time we were visiting him in Lancashire" (256), she hired as maid (and, as she hoped, as her husband's mistress too) a young actress named Aveline Mortimer, whom Elizabeth hated because she had played a dirty trick on her in the old times and also because she was, like herself, an illegitimate child. When Aveline gets pregnant, she destroys the unborn infant (256) and then starts poisoning her husband, who already suspects her of being the Golem. This is her last crime for, thanks to Aveline's testimony, she is imprisoned, tried, and sentenced to death for his murder.

[2] The reversibility and complementarity of Dan Leno and Elizabeth Cree is also, incidentally, revealed by the fact that the American edition of the novel is entitled *The Trial of Elizabeth Cree.*

After inheriting his father's fortune, John Cree had given up the job of newspaper reporter in order to write a social drama about the condition of the London poor, entitled *Misery Junction.* Elizabeth had hoped to make a further leap from music-hall comedian to the much more respectable role of serious actress, impersonating the central character. Incapable, however, of waiting for her husband to finish the play, she had hurriedly written her own version, unwittingly transforming "Catherine Dove, the poor orphan girl" (231) into a parody of her own "dark life" (232) in which her evil nature is given away. However, unable to sell the play, she hires the theatre for one night and fills it with "all the loiterers and dawdlers of Limehouse" (236). As happened before with her impersonations, Elizabeth sees her new role as "a new life for me upon the stage" (238). Therefore, when her interpretation is met with the "general laughter" (240) of the riotous crowd, she gives up attempting to deny her origins and to escape her fate. Seeing "her own anxiety and bewilderment" reflected in "the faces of the fallen women all lit up by the gas, grinning and yawning" (242), she mildly accepts her last role: that of scapegoat for the social degeneracy of Limehouse. Elizabeth's last transformation to scapegoat comes full circle when, like the prostitutes she had ritually mutilated, she endures the ritual (forensic) mutilation of her head and brain (2, 274) at the hands of the London authorities.

The novel begins on 6th April, 1881 with the description of the hanging of Elizabeth Cree in Camberwell Prison, at the age of 31. It ends with the announcement, "A week before Elizabeth Cree's execution" (276), of the imminent performance of the "authoritative version of *Misery Junction*" (276), which, ironically enough, is Elizabeth's version of John Cree's play altered beyond recognition by the proprietor of the theatre, Gertrude Latimer, who has asked her husband to "improve" it and turn it into the "true history of the Crees" (277). In the new version, the heroine's name (Catherine Dove) is changed to "Elizabeth Cree," and her part is to be played by Aveline Mortimer. The play begins exactly like *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem,* "with the execution of Elizabeth Cree in the yard of Camberwell Prison"

(278). The audience is awe-stricken and delighted. But Leno realizes that "something had gone terribly wrong . . . and that the neck of Aveline Mortimer must surely be broken as she dangled beneath the stage" (281). And it is Dan Leno who, as he has so often done before, improvises a solution: "clambering up the fatal rope in the dress of Madame Gruyère," he revives Elizabeth Cree on another guise "just as she had been before when she played the 'Older Brother' or 'Little Victor's Daughter', and it was a source of joy and exhilaration that the great Dan Leno should impersonate her" (282).

Thus Dan Leno, the music-hall monopolylinguist, puts an end to the cycle of evil, absorbing the Limehouse Golem and transforming it into a humourous and harmless music-hall transvestite character. With this transformation, the chaotic phase comes to an end, order is restored, and life in London can begin a new cycle, for the city that has bred the Golem is also the city that has bred the comedian/magus capable of absorbing it and expelling it in the cathartic ritual of drama. Like the "ghost eater" in the ancient tribe who had eaten too many sins in *English Music* (Ackroyd, 1992: 151–52), Leno (and also Leno's predecessor, Joseph Grimaldi) dies young, of sheer exhaustion, after having played Mother Goose once too often (168). Indeed his rare art of impersonation is comparable to the drug-induced trances of the Sphinx at Delphi, or of tribal medicine men: "He drank wildly and incessantly until he woke the following morning without a care in the world. He knew that, in his drunkenness, he would enact many of his familiar characters . . . . When he woke up . . . he felt much at peace, as if he had performed an exorcism" (204).

George Gissing, as we have seen, reconciles his contradictory admiration for industrial progress and his romantic humanism in a vision of the women workers in a ghostly "manufacture," toiling for ever, ant-like, and "singing in unison" (245). The vision becomes for him an image of "perpetual, infinite London." But the traces of infinite London vary according to the eye of the beholder, for, as in *The House of Doctor Dee*, they are the reflections of the images grown in the heart of the individual. Thus Dan Leno finds his own traces of "London eternal" the day when, carried away by his admiration for Joseph Grimaldi, he visits the house where he had lived and finds instead a starving music-hall comedian named Harry Chaplin, whose pregnant wife is very ill. Leno sent for his own doctor and thus "managed to save the unborn infant's life" (200); that is, Dan Leno saved the life of Charles Chaplin. Logically implausible though it is, this episode again confirms Ackroyd's conviction that there are "patterns of habitation, and patterns of inheritance, which seem to emerge from the very streets and alleys of the capital" (1993a). From Ackroyd's perspective, it is quite natural that the small room "with old playbills and song sheets plastered upon the walls" (Ackroyd, 1994: 200) where Grimaldi had lived would attract Dan Leno and the Chaplins alike, in the same way that Doctor Dee's house kept attracting a particular kind of writer/visionary.

The same logic underlies the prescription of a series of precautions to prevent the return of the Golem. Thomas De Quincey explained that the corpse of John Williams had been buried "in the centre of a quadrivium, . . . with a stake driven through his heart" (275). More rational, though equally ineffective, are the measures taken in the case of Elizabeth Cree: her head was severed, her brain analyzed for malformations, and her body "covered with quicklime to encourage speedy decomposition" (274). We know that, for all these precautions, the Golem will be attracted again to the same evil quarter mile of London in 1888, as "Jack the Ripper," when the old wisdom preserved in the popular songs and ballads will again be forgotten and Londoners will once more allow the material world to take the form of "The World Without Love."

In September 1996 Ackroyd published his latest novel to date, *Milton in America*. With it, the writer provisionally puts an end to the series of London-based novels and takes us on a journey with John Milton (1608–1674) to the New World on the eve of the Restoration of the monarchy in the person of Charles II. As the external narrator explains in a foreword, Milton, who "had been struck by blindness eight years before . . . had no choice but to escape while there was still opportunity to do so. And where better to flee than New England, where he would be assured of a joyful welcome from the Puritans who had already settled there?" In other words, the novel fictionalizes the possibility that Milton would have been one of the numerous Puritans who fled England in 1660 after the downfall of the Commonwealth during the few months preceding the arrival of Charles II from his exile in France, thus situating itself within the tradition of the American historical romance that goes back to Charles Brockden Brown's *Wieland* (1798), "the first of many American tales to record the story of the new American Eden and the fall that took place there" (Budick, 1989: 26).

As the narrator further states, Milton had been the former "Secretary for Foreign Tongues to the Council of Oliver Cromwell . . . and had even written a tract justifying the execution of Charles I." This tract, entitled *The Ready and Easy Way to Establish a Free Common-*

wealth (1660), could have caused Milton a lot of trouble, as it was a last-minute attempt to defend the "Good Old Cause" of republicanism, but, given his old age and blindness, and probably also thanks to the intervention of such influential friends as D'Avenant and Marvell, he was only arrested, fined, and released. In Ackroyd's version, instead of staying in England in order to publish *Paradise Lost* (1667) and *Paradise Regained* (1671), Milton travels to America with a "London poor boy" (1996: 22) whom he encounters on the road as he is fleeing from his master, "a scrivener in Leadenhall" (24). The boy, who is going to act as the blind poet's amanuensis and guide, is nicknamed by Milton "Goosequill" because his hair "always stands up straight, however hard I [Goosequill] brush it down" (25).

Karl Miller has noted how Milton and Goosequill "are, at first, like Sancho and Don Quixote" (1996: 16), and indeed they share the archetypal complementarity of Cervantes's characters. But the fact that Milton is blind and that he has met the roguish boy on the road also brings to mind another archetypal couple, the one formed by Lazarillo de Tormes and his first master, the blind beggar. Further, the fact that the boy's nickname, Goosequill, is also Thomas Chatterton's nickname[3] brings to mind Chatterton's fictional alter ego, the medieval blind monk and bard, Thomas Rowley, whom Chatterton made physically blind in order to suggest that he had spiritual or visionary insight. Like Rowley, the fictional Milton enjoys what he himself describes, in an accurate pastiche of the real Milton's style, as "my own inward sight that reaches the highest altitudes and the furthest depths" (Ackroyd, 1996: 11).

Goosequill fulfils the functions of all his literary ancestors: like Chatterton he acts as the blind man's faithful scribe, keeping Milton's "journal of the sea" (37), and writing down Milton's letters to his former clerk in the "old abolished Council," Reginald de la Pole (39); like Lázaro, he is endlessly resourceful in the face of unexpected trouble: he convinces the villagers of Kingclere to repair the broken wheel of their cart exploiting their fear of catching an imaginary contagion (27); he barters Milton's translations of the psalms for food with "a family of godwits" (50) during the transatlantic journey, and, when they are shipwrecked, he saves Milton from drowning (59) and preserves his life in the wilderness until they meet Eleazar Lusher, the beaver hunter

[3] In the fake papers found by Charles Wychwood, Chatterton presents himself as "Tom Goose-Quill, Tom-all-Alone, or Poor Tom" (Ackroyd, 1988: 81).

who leads them to New Tiverton, the Puritan settlement (81). Like Sancho Panza and Don Quixote, Goosequill and Milton are always talking to each other, yet they cannot communicate because they live in utterly different worlds. Milton, like the "knight of the sad countenance," sees his own life-story in romantic terms as "a history . . . as doleful as any tale of knight errantry" (26). Yet his enthusiastic promise to "recompense you [Goosequill] with immortality" is characteristically met by the boy's Sanchoesque down-to-earth retort: "I like fine words, as you know, but they cannot be cooked and eaten" (29). However, unlike the garrulous but obedient Spanish servant, Goosequill is unable to accept his master's orders uncritically and ends up, as Lázaro did with the blind beggar, betraying Milton and abandoning him.

During their cart journey from London to the Devon coast, Milton explains to Goosequill that he "is leav[ing] England in order to save England" (Ackroyd, 1996: 29), and it may be said that in the novel Milton gives up writing *Paradise Lost* in order to *live* the poem, for, as John Bayley has noted, the novel is an "amazingly powerful [fantasy], as if *Paradise Lost* really had been enacted in the New World" (1996: 37).

The novel begins with Goosequill interrupting a dream of his master in order to tell him that they "have caught sight of the new land" (6). Lulled by the rocking of the ship — fittingly called *Gabriel*, like the Archangel in charge of the Gates of Paradise — blind Milton associates the movements of the waves with the constant beating of the "unmeasured ocean of [his] mind" (5), thus suggesting that his pilgrimage to New England is a double quest, physical and spiritual, for illumination. The dreamer synthesizes this idea through one of Ackroyd's favorite topoi, that of the "wandering hero," which Milton derives from the beginning of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, from his own poem "Lycidas," and from the temptation and fall of "blind Samson, snared and taken in the darkness" (5). In his dream, Milton compares Samson's temptation by Delilah (an Old Testament variation on the archetypal topos of the tempting of Adam by Eve and subject of Milton's *Samson Agonistes*) to his own predicament: "The fruit of lechery is woe, yet I am tempted still. Ah, Samson, in the eternity of East Cheap" (5). However, the Puritan poet soon shakes off this association and, before Goosequill succeeds in awakening him, goes on comparing his journey with the archetypal journeys of mythological heroes: Aeneas and his pilot Palinurus, Odysseus, and King Arthur (6).

From the start, therefore, Milton sees himself as a mythological hero with the colossal task of creating the perfect Commonwealth in New

England, a task comparable to the work of the Creation in six days, which, according to *Paradise Lost*, God accomplished through the agency of his Son.[4] But Milton's self-imposed task is also comparable to that of the American Puritans, who, as Emily Miller Budick notes, by "identifying themselves so thoroughly and literally with the ancient Israelites as to become 'American Israelites,' the nation of Israel incarnate . . . allowed for no difference between Old Testament and New America."[5]

In *Paradise Lost*, Satan's rebellion, the battle in Heaven, and the defeat and expulsion of Satan and his Legions to Hell motivates God's decision to send the Messiah to create a new world and new creatures to dwell in it. Milton sees his journey in similar terms, as a God-inspired task to create a replica of the Commonwealth in New England after the failure of the Puritan republic. However, the fact that, after his expulsion from Heaven, Satan decides to visit Eden, qualifies this interpretation by simultaneously suggesting the troubling possibility that Milton might be going to the New World in order to destroy it. This interpretation is fostered by the fact that both Satan and Milton have been cast out of Heaven/England by a victorious and angry God/King and is in keeping with William Blake's now famous critique of *Paradise Lost* in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1790), which proclaims that Milton was a "true Poet and of the Devil's party without knowing it" (Sampson, ed., 1956: 249). Blake's interpretation preceded the Romantic version, disseminated principally by Shelley, which represented Satan, the Arch-Rebel, as the true hero of *Paradise Lost*.

In keeping with the suggested celestial/infernal ambiguity of Milton, the New World is presented as a replica of England with ambivalent hellish/Edenic features. When the *Gabriel* nears the Massachusetts

[4] "and thou my Word, begotten Son, by thee/ This I perform, speak thou, and be it done" (*Paradise Lost*. Book VII: 162–63).

[5] As Budick further points out, "In trying to reestablish the promised land or recreate Eden they destroyed the possibility of a genuine and meaningful American history. Like their ancestor in *Wieland*, Reuben Bourne of Hawthorne's 'Roger Malvin's Burial,' Captain Vere of Melville's *Billy Budd*, Jessie Bentley of Sherwood Anderson's 'Godliness,' Grandfather Fortune of Flannery O'Connor's 'A View of the Woods,' and Isaac McCaslin of Faulkner's *Go Down, Moses*, all interpret their lives' experience as if they were antitypes enacting great originating events. More important for American history, they imagine themselves capable of restoring paradise and of redeeming the promised land" (38–39).

coast for the first time, Goosequill is reminded of "Hackney marshes on a wet morning" (7), and "when the coast appeared again it was as if their own country had emerged from the waves, newborn, as empty and as pure as it had been before the Druids subdued it with their magic" (11). After the shipwreck, Milton and Goosequill come upon the summit of a hill and the boy sees ahead of him "valleys and hills, woods and lakes, and white mountains in the far distance" (69) spreading in perfect harmony reminiscent of the "order in variety" of Pope's "Windsor Forest" (1713).[6] On hearing this description Milton enthusiastically concludes that "We have come out of Sodom into the land of Canaan," but as soon as he utters these words, he loses balance and slips over the edge of a cliff (69). Although his fall is stopped by a providential tree and although there is an Edenic spring that eventually grows into a stream, it runs along the edge of a great threatening forest and leads to a clearing where "the ground was scorched and blackened." The forest is swarming with glow-worms whose phosphorescence Goosequill fearfully associates with "wolves approaching." And Milton's paradisal dream "that we were in a great forest [with] many turtle-doves . . . cooing" is interrupted when "the flies woke me" (71, 73). Indeed, the only edible fruit they find is a sweet "dark berry [hanging] in many luscious clusters. As luscious as your [Kate's] mouth" (76). The association of the "dark" berries with the mouth of Kate Jervis, the girl from the Puritan settlement whom Goosequill eventually marries, brings to mind Chaucer's locution, "goon a-blackeberied" in "The Pardoner's Prologue" (line 118) and also the popular French expression "aller aux fraises," both of which have clear sexual connotations and evoke God's prohibition to eat from the Tree of Knowledge. Indeed, Goosequill soon learns about the dangers of attempting to eat the fruits the forest offers for when he tries to touch what seems to be a tempting "golden fruit," it unexpectedly dissolves "into a cloud of wasps" (76).

The archetypal good/evil nature of the New World is enhanced by Milton's remark at the beginning of the novel that New England looks like "a sleeper ready to awake" (10). This image brings to mind Doctor Dee's hieroglyphic monad and also Blake's Albion, a figure which represents England and the prelapsarian and universal human form of all

[6] "Here hills and vales, the woodland and the plain,/ Here earth and water seem to strive again,/ Not chaos-like together crushed and bruised,/ But, as the world, harmoniously confused: where order in variety we see,/ And where, though all things differ, all agree" (Rogers, ed., 1994: 20–21).

being, and which Blake describes in *Milton, a Poem* as either dead (2:1) or asleep (22: 3.5). In other words, the image suggests that New England is a whole Self/World in need of (spiritual) awakening. When he starts the journey, Milton is convinced that his task is precisely that of awakening this sleeper to the "true" faith. However, after being lost in the wilderness for two days, like Christ when he was tempted by the Devil in the desert, he starts doubting whether God has sent him to New England in order to raise "Eden in this wilderness," or whether the journey was "a divine punishment" (74). This terrible doubt torments Milton throughout the novel and determines his future behavior.

Before the wreck of the *Gabriel*, Goosequill had remarked that the white cliffs of the Massachussetts coast were arranged "in the shape of a half-moon, with two arms outstretched towards us." The comparison with "the shape of a half moon" brings to mind Raphael Hythlodaeus's description of the island of Utopia "as a sort of crescent" (More, 1971: 69). However, Milton immediately associates the white cliffs with "those of Dover" (12), an association made more significant by Ackroyd's remark in *The Life of Thomas More* that the dimensions of Utopia "are the same as those of England" and that its principal city, Amaurotum is "London redrawn by visionary imagination, a pristine city, in which . . . there is no greed or pride or disorder (1998: 167). Goosequill's and Milton's apparently banal remarks, therefore — like Milton's description of New England as "a sleeper ready to awake" — underline the interchangeability of England and New England and its condition of "self/world" or "mystical city" in the Catholic tradition that runs from Saint Augustine's *City of God* to Blake's Albion.

As Paul Turner has pointed out, Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516) inaugurates a kind of fiction whose germ "is probably to be found in ancient descriptions of paradise," ranging from *The Epic of Gilgamesh* and the description of the Elysian fields in the *Odyssey* to the *Republic*, in which Plato "adds the element of serious political theory to the earlier vein of pure wishful thinking . . . . In the *Republic* Socrates works out the idea of a perfect state, which embodies the principle of justice, and includes the communal ownership of goods and of women" (1971: 16). Ackroyd, likewise, points out how More, following Saint Augustine, considers Plato "as the greatest of pagan philosophers," and how, although he was never vouchsafed the revelation, he was believed to have anticipated "Christianity and Christian revelation . . . through 'natural reason'" (Ackroyd, 1998: 168). Ackroyd notes that Plato's condition is the condition of the Utopians: "That is why they encourage euthanasia, condone divorce and harbour a multiplicity of religious beliefs all of which actions were considered dreadful by More himself and by Catholic Europe. This may be no ideal commonwealth, after all, but a model of natural law and natural reason taken to their unnatural extreme." (168–9). Indeed, as he further notes, "*Utopia* is an ambivalent and ambiguous work in which various absurdities, for example, are paraded in the most apparent innocent and unsatirical manner" (170). Paul Turner, likewise, warns the reader to bear in mind the fact that: "Utopia does not represent a positive ideal, but a negative attack on European wickedness. Its object is to shame Christians into behaving . . . far better than the poor Utopian heathen" (1971: 11). In other words, the association of New England with Utopia gives an ironic twist to the whole adventure, undermining the credibility of Milton's project.

The possibility of reading Milton's intended task ironically is suggested by Milton himself when he compares his journey to that of Palinurus. Aeneas's pilot is also mentioned by Thomas More's friend, Peter Giles at the beginning of *Utopia*, when he says that Raphael was not "a sailor of the Palinurus type. He is really more like Ulysses, or even Plato" (38). Palinurus, Aeneas's pilot, went to sleep at the helm, fell into the sea, swam ashore, and was murdered by the local inhabitants (*Aeneid*, V, 833–71; VI, 349–62). Therefore, Milton's reflection that "The voyage of Palinurus was not more blessed than this" (6) becomes premonitory of the shipwreck of the *Gabriel* and of Milton's own near-drowning but also gives an ironic turn to Milton's self-imposed heroic task, for as Paul Turner makes clear, "The point seems to be that Palinurus was a professional sailor, not a philosophical explorer [like Raphael Hythlodaeus], and was not an outstandingly wide-awake type" (1971: 135). From this perspective, Milton's reverie concerning the heroic creation of a Puritan Paradise in New England is cut down to human size and presented as the Utopian dream of a man who does not enjoy "inward sight" but rather suffers from (physical and spiritual) blindness.

The ambiguity of Milton's journey is reflected structurally in the alternation of narrative voices and genres. The novel begins, as we have seen, with Goosequill interrupting Milton's dream of a heroic future. It will end symmetrically with Milton awakening after his participation in an Indian "feast of dreams" (Ackroyd, 1996: 274). The events that take place between these two dreams are divided into two parts, entitled "Eden" and "Fall" and are narrated by three different agencies: the foreword, chapter Two of Part One, and chapters Three, Six, Seven,

Nine, Fourteen, and Sixteen of Part Two are narrated by an external author-narrator. Chapter Four of Part One reproduces the "maritime chronicles" written by Goosequill in a "little book bound in white calves' leather" that Milton has given him to keep their "journal of the sea" (37). It runs from the day they embark, April 2, 1660 (38), until their shipwreck, on June 5, 1660 (58). Chapter Twelve of Part One is also a diary, but is directly narrated by Milton. It begins on August 25, 1661 (143) and ends on December 20, 1661 (152), the day Milton disappears in the wilderness. The remaining chapters of Part One alternate a retrospective "familiar conversation" between Goosequill and Kate Jervis in the tradition established by *Utopia*, with letters written by Milton to Reginald de la Pole in a flourishing Restoration genre, the epistle. This alternation of conversations and letters continues in chapters Two, Four, Eleven, and Thirteen of Part Two. Chapter Fifteen reproduces a conversation between Milton and the beaver hunter Eleazer Lusher, while chapters One, Five, Eight, and Seventeen in this second part are narrated by what may be described as an alternation of Milton's voice in the first and the third person. Thus, the division of the novel into two parts is reflected by the reduplication of the narrative oppositional pairs formed by Goosequill's and Milton's diaries, on the one hand, and by Goosequill's conversation with Kate and Milton's letters to de la Pole, on the other, providing what Karl Miller has called "a fiction" and "a counter-fiction, an alternative version of the fable" (1996: 16). Milton's fiction and Goosequill's counterfiction are structurally reconciled in the more "objective" narrative of the external author-narrator, comparable to Ackroyd/God. The alternation of competing narrative voices, genres, and versions is further complicated by the fact that the events narrated do not follow a linear chronological order, but rather move forward and backward, suggesting the temporal circularity of myth, or of dreams, remembering that the events narrated are framed by Milton's dreams at the beginning and the end of the novel.

In order to interpret Milton's and Goosequill's incompatible and utterly opposed narrations it is necessary to understand the basis of their respective world-views. Milton, whose knowledge and love of classical literature and culture far surpasses his interest in religion, knows the *Republic* and *Utopia* very well, but he prefers "Plato's commonwealth" (131) to *Utopia*, which he considers to be a childish book, tainted by More's papistry (251). The two models may be said to suffuse the whole novel. While Milton's commonwealth may be described as a Puritan adaptation of Plato's *Republic* (and of Aristotle's *Politics*),

the nearby Catholic settlement of Mary Mount led by Ralph Kempis, with which Goosequill immediately identifies, shares basic traits in common with More's story. As we will see, each model is also strongly influenced by one of the two main streams of political thought in England during the latter half of the seventeenth century: Milton's by the doctrines of Thomas Hobbes and his disciples, and Kempis's by those of Hobbes's opponents, Richard Cumberland and Samuel Pufendorf.

When the Puritans of New Tiverton ask Milton to lead them in the construction and government of the new Puritan settlement, which they intend to call New Milton in his honor, the poet submits his leadership to a general vote (110) and insists that "Where men are equal they ought to have an equal interest in government" (111). The defender of regicide "utterly abhor[s] any arbitrary rule or government" and reassures his followers that, while he is "content to be your judge, your magistrate and your shepherd" (105), he will not "like Brutus be forced to reign. Otherwise I will be no better than the pharaoh who now sits upon London" (109). For all his democratic protestations, however, Milton in fact never listens to any of his followers or to Goosequill's frequent criticisms. When Goosequill, after narrowly escaping a blow from his master, protests "I am employing free speech, sir! Remember honest liberty!," Milton retorts, "I shall be the judge of what is to be free" (49). The laws Milton promulgates for his own brethren contemplate all kinds of physical and psychological tortures, including the burning alive of offenders, and for all the proofs of friendship and good will of their neighbours, Milton's policy is constantly aimed at the annihilation of the Catholic and Indian settlements. Ralph Kempis, the Royalist leader of Mary Mount, synthesizes the apparent contradiction between Milton's republican ideals and his practical behavior when he tells Milton: "You pretend to a commonwealth and yet you lord it over all. You are a tyrant, Mr Milton" (230). Interestingly, Milton does not bother to answer the charge and dismisses it as an example of Kempis's folly: "How hard it is when a man meets with a fool to keep his tongue from folly" (230).

As Maximilian E. Novak has noted, for the Puritans, "the use of reason in combating the passions is a categorical imperative, and those who deny this command fit into the category [of] 'Fools'" (1965: 12). This is the meaning Milton has in mind when he calls Kempis a fool. The leader of the Catholic settlement is for Milton the epitome of folly because he represents the kind of people whom Milton believes to be ruled by their passions and their love of pleasure, rather than by their enlightened reason.

According to medieval Christian thought, when God created man he gave him the capacity to distinguish good and evil through the Law of Nature. Richard Hooker summarizes the medieval definition of Natural Law when he says that it includes "all those things which men by the light of their natural understanding evidently know" (Novak, 1965: 3). According to Novak, this concept of a universal standard of reason had a strong attraction for the Puritans: "A glance at William Ames's *Conscience*, a Puritan classic, will show how well Natural Law suited the Calvinistic view of man. Ames defined the Law of Nature as 'that Law of God, which is naturally written in the hearts of all men'" (3).

However, the Puritans believed that after the Fall, Natural Law was insufficient to overrule the passions and that reason would not be strong enough to guide man to virtue. This is why God sent Moses the Tablets of the Law, considered to be the Secondary Laws of Nature, and also why man needs the support of the Gospels and faith to develop an "enlightened conscience." Thus, although Milton is ready to concede that the Indians were originally "very like the ancient Britons," that is, like the original natural man, he is convinced that they have degenerated and become like "those heathen Irish who used to feed upon the buttocks of boys and the paps of women" (Ackroyd, 1996: 133). For Milton, the basic difference between the Indians (or any other kind of "heathen," including the Catholics) and the Puritan settlers is precisely that, while the former still live according to the Law of Nature, the latter live according to "the moral law," a law that "is grounded on the principles of nature and right reason" (129) but enlightened by ("true") religion.

By contrast, the integration of Catholic and Indian rites that takes place in Mary Mount brings to mind the religious toleration reigning in Thomas More's *Utopia*. Like the Utopians, who belonged to "different sects" yet were ready to agree that there is one "Supreme Being . . . identical with Nature," and "that God made different people believe different things, because He wanted to be worshipped in many different ways" (More, 1971: 117–19), the Catholics of Mary Mount are ready to admit that "Kiwasa . . . is much like our Holy Spirit" and do not see any harm in allowing the Indians to burn tobacco instead of incense in honour of the Virgin (Ackroyd, 1996: 178). From the perspective of the Utopians, Milton's religious fanaticism would be comparable to that of the misled member of their congregation who, "not content with asserting the superiority of our faith [Christianity], went so far as to condemn all others. He kept shouting at the top of his voice that they were all vile superstitions, and that all who believed in them were monsters of impiety, destined to be punished in hell-fire for ever." As Raphael Hythlodaeus explains, this man "was arrested and charged, not with blasphemy, but with disturbance of the peace" (More, 1971: 119). In keeping with their religious toleration, the Utopians have "nothing to be seen or heard in their churches which can't equally well be applied to all religions" (125). Similarly, in Mary Mount there are two adjacent tents, one with an image of the Virgin and another with the Indian wooden idol of "a man or god squatting upon the ground" (Ackroyd, 1996: 178). Both shrines are situated where the Pequots, who had sold the land to Kempis, said that there was "a spring of sacred water which cured agues and fever" (185).

The colorful and disorderly display of Kempis's followers is reminiscent not only of the "multi-coloured vestments" of the Utopian priests, "decorated with the feathers of various birds" (More, 1971: 127), but also of the great importance attributed to color and apparel according to rank in Pre-Reformation England.[7] These colors and feathers symbolize prelapsarian bliss and point to the mythical roots shared by Catholics and Indians, in striking contrast with the black garments and sickly pallid faces of the brethren following Milton's repressive rules, which seem exclusively aimed at destroying all sources of happiness, from pastimes such as drinking, music, or dancing (193), to the laughter of children (163), which, according to T. S. Eliot, symbolizes the innocent pleasure of Eden before the Fall.[8]

But the most overt intertext of Mary Mount is Nathaniel Hawthorne's sketch "The Maypole of Merry Mount" (Hawthorne, 1978: 287–98), as the phonetic similarity of the names of both settlements suggests. Hawthorne's tale is narrated by a "New England an-

[7] In *The Life of Thomas More*, Ackroyd notes how "In the Act of Apparel 1483, for example, purple and velvet were forbidden to lawyers; in 1486 it was decreed that the hems of livery gowns were to be 'one foot above the soles' of shoes. The colour and material of dress were also of paramount importance in a society which was established upon display and spectacle" (1998: 8).

[8] For example, in "Burnt Norton": "the leaves were full of children,/ Hidden excitedly, containing laughter" (Eliot, 1974: 190). Milton's abhorrence of laughter also brings to mind the (Catholic) blind monk in Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* (1983), Jorge de Burgos, who preferred to poison his brethren and to burn with his books rather than allow them to read the only extant copy of Aristotle's *Treatise on Comedy*.

nalist," who records the history of the "gay colony" of Mount Wollaston or Merry Mount, the site of an early trading company near Plymouth, Massachussetts. The narrator-annalist explains how, in those days: "Jollity and gloom were contending for an empire" and how, "should their banner be triumphant, [the settlers of Merry Mount] were to pour sunshine over New England's rugged hills, and scatter flower seeds throughout the soil" (287).

It is easy to see the parallelism between "the grim Puritans" (293) in Hawthorne's tale and the "Particular Separatist Elect" in Ackroyd's novel, and between the "mirthful spirit dwell[ing] all the year round at Merry Mount" (287) and the jollity of Indians and Catholics at Mary Mount. The narrator in Hawthorne's sketch constantly associates the lively rituals of the community with those of classical paganism: he calls them "people of the Golden Age" (288) and compares them to "Fauns and Nymphs" but also to "Gothic monsters, though perhaps of Grecian ancestry" (288).[9] As in Mary Mount, the maypole, the ancestral symbol of seasonal renewal, is at the center of Merry Mount, and, to the scandal of their grim Puritan neighbours, its "votaries danced round it, once, at least, in every month," and "sang ballads and told tales" (293). As the narrator points out, the future complexion of New England wholly depended on which of the two models of society would eventually prevail.

The festive spirit and the love of ritual and ceremony shared by Hawthorne's and Ackroyd's maypole revelers was a common phenomenon in Thomas More's Catholic England. As Ackroyd explains, London had then "many Maypoles, with a 'knape' or bunch of flowers on its top, so high that it towered over the steeple of the church itself" (1998: 112). Indeed, May Day in Pre-Reformation England was a seasonal celebration suffused with the same pagan spirit the narrator detects in Hawthorne's sketch: "On May Day itself the king and queen rode out from Greenwich Palace, and on their way were met by 'Robin Hood' with two hundred archers dressed in green garments; the royal pair were invited to dine in a wood near Shooters Hill" (160). The plasticity of the description, with the unexpectedly large number of archers dressed in green, succinctly conveys the pagan spirit of seasonal

[9] The mixture of mythical and Catholic rituals is the basic element in the definition of "high literature" given in *Hieroglyphics* (1902) by the early twentieth-century visionary writer Arthur Machen, whose horror and detective stories have been mentioned as forerunners of *Hawksmoor*. Cf. Onega. 1997.

renewal suffusing the Catholic festival, whose living emblem is the "Green Man." This festive spirit and the love of ritual and ceremony inherited by Hawthorne's and Ackroyd's revelers had many other forms of expression in the liturgical ceremonies of the Catholic year, such as the beautiful and awe-inspiring baptism ritual with which More's biography begins (1–3). All of them convey the spirit of the medieval Catholic European visionary culture of which Thomas More formed an inseparable part, and which the Reformation strove to eradicate.

Like the Puritans in Hawthorne's tale, Milton is perfectly aware of the subversive nature of the carnivalesque spirit reigning in the neighbouring settlement and the threat it represents for the survival of Puritanism. This is why he eventually decides to raise an army in order to destroy Mary Mount. In Hawthorne's tale, the Puritan leader, John Endicott, also leads an army against the Merry Mount settlement: he interrupts the wedding of the Lord and Lady of the May and cuts down the maypole, thus confirming their "rigorous destiny, in the shape of the Puritan leader, their only guide" (Hawthorne, 1978: 296–97). However, the future predicted by the narrator is not so gloomy, since, "at the fair spectacle of early love . . . the iron man was softened . . . . And Endicott, the severest Puritan of all who laid the rock-foundation of New England, lifted the wreath of roses from the ruin of the Maypole, and threw it, with his own gauntleted hand, over the heads of the Lord and Lady of the May" (298).

The sketch ends with the newly married Lord and Lady of the May in a scene closely reminiscent of Adam and Eve's expulsion from Paradise at the end of *Paradise Lost:* "their home of wild mirth made desolate," they are condemned to return "to it no more" (298).[10] However, their punishment is made lighter by the knowledge that they still hold in their intertwined hands "all the purest and best of their early joys. They went heavenwards, supporting each other along the difficult path which it was their lot to tread" (298).

Milton's fear of the passions would explain why he abhors laughter in general — "there is no whispering and laughter in paradise . . . so wherefore should we suffer them here?" (Ackroyd, 1996: 163) — and the preternatural merriment of the Catholic settlers in particular, their "wanton and untimely singing" (192) and the fact that "the papists are daily, gluttonous and incontinent drunkards" (192). His reaction is to

[10] Compare Hawthorne's ending to that of *Paradise Lost*: "They [Adam and Eve] hand in hand, with wandering steps and slow,/ through Eden took their solitary way" (Book XII: 648–49).

oppose their evil example with ever more repressive rules, as he tells Goosequill: "I must guard and preserve you all. I cannot slacken the reins [of Plato's black horses of passion]" (194).

Milton tells his brethren that "Where men are equal they ought to have an equal interest in government" (111), but he does not explain what he means by equality. Where the Catholics and Indians had "suffered so much hardship . . . that we have become one body" (178), and they consider themselves so equal that male Catholics often "married squaws, with many children issuing from these unions" (182), the whole force of the Puritan settlement is based on a strict hierarchical structure of separation that evinces the influence of Aristotle's *Politics*. As C. S. Lewis has pointed out, for Aristotle, "justice means equality for equals, and inequality for unequals." Aristotle believed that "the soul is the natural ruler of the body, the male of the female, reason of passion. Slavery is justified because some men are to other men as souls are to bodies." Therefore, there are as many kinds of rule as there are kinds of superiority or inferiority: "a man should rule his slaves despotically, his children monarchically, and his wife politically; soul should be the despot of body but reason the constitutional king of passion" (Lewis, 1975: 74).

Milton is so conscious of his own hierarchical superiority as leader of the Puritan community that, although he abhors Catholicism and the English Royalists of Mary Mount, "It often occurred to Goosequill that his master would prefer the company of Kempis to that of the precise separatist brethren with whom he was compelled to live" (183). Goosequill's realization is the more ironic when we remember that Kempis is soon to be crowned "King of Mary Mount" (238). That Milton's followers share a similar hierarchical view of society is evident from their self-imposed title: "Particular Separatist Elect" (144).[11] In accordance with its tenets, Milton's plan for the construction of New Milton is based on a Manichaean separation of the "elect" from the

[11] Their name parodies that of the "Separatists," the more radical Puritan faction, whose religious intransigence came to a climax in the "Covenant of Grace," the doctrine that "only those men and women upon whom God sheds His grace are saved . . . those excluded from God's grace lack the power to believe in a Saviour, thus are not only not saved but damned." (Oates, 1996: 46). Before the Civil Wars, many "Separatists" went into exile in America, thus becoming the "Pilgrims" who settled in Plymouth, Massachussetts in the 1620s. Many more joined them after the collapse of the Commonwealth.

"evil" that reeks of panic: "we must build stone walls and mighty trenches to protect ourselves against the inroads of the pagan enemy" (102). These defensive stone walls and palisades, meant to separate ordered nature (or society) from chaotic nature (or wilderness), bring to mind another Puritan character shipwrecked in the New World, Robinson Crusoe, who was utterly panic-stricken until he found a cave to hide in and surrounded his shelter with an impenetrable wall of stakes.

The construction of these defensive structures by Milton and Crusoe are in keeping with Thomas Hobbes's contention in *Leviathan* that man's ruling passion in the state of nature would be fear: "In such condition, there is no place for Industry; because the fruit thereof is uncertain . . . no Arts; no Letters; no Society; and which is worst of all, continual feare, and danger of violent death. And the life of man, solitary, poore, nasty, brutish and short" (1935: 84). Likewise, Milton's promulgation of strict repressive laws has to do with the Puritan justification of the "slavery of reason," the acceptance of suffering on the grounds that true freedom is not to be found in the state of nature but rather under law and government. That is, Milton's justification for his repressive policy is based on his conviction that virtue is unattainable without religion and that his government is ruled according to the dictates of moral law.

Milton's horror of miscegenation, his happiness when he learns that the Pequots "by God's grace, had been all but extirpated by the brethren ten years ago" (82), and his justification of the settlers' intention to evict them from their land and to subdue them to their will (85) is based on the same principle that allowed Robinson Crusoe to enslave Friday, the Calvinistic belief that only a few chosen ones are holy and that natural fallen man is not only inferior, but the very spawn of the devil, to paraphrase Cotton Mather, the Presbyterian divine involved in the Salem witch trials of 1692. Milton quotes from the prophet Jeremiah to express this view: "Can the Ethiopian change his skin, or the leopard his spots? Then may ye also do good, that are accustomed to do evil" (94).

In the hands of Hobbes and Locke the theory of Natural Law evolved into an explosive political and ethical doctrine which stressed the rights of self-defence and self-preservation of the individual (*amor sui*). By contrast, writers such as Shaftesbury and Cumberland placed the emphasis on the obligations of the individual and contended that man is naturally good and is governed by his "moral sense," that man should willingly set limits to his self-love in order to achieve the common good of society. We can say that this benevolent theory suffuses

the behavior of the Catholic settlers of Mary Mount and dictates their attitude towards the Indians. As Novak has pointed out, although the majority of writers endorsed the Puritan position with respect to man in the state of nature, there were two main alternative theories that strongly opposed it: "Some writers believed that the isolated natural man might through the use of his reason achieve the same moral and intellectual conditions as the human beings raised in society. Others . . . suggested that he would be savage and brutish but have greater freedom and happiness and fewer vices than civilized man" (1965: 23).

After the shipwreck of the *Gabriel* "on the rocks past Sakonnet Point" (82), the first man Goosequill and Milton encounter is Eleazer Lusher, a beaver hunter who "lived in solitude" (81). Yet, in contrast to Crusoe, "he seemed content with his seclusion" (81) and refuses to live in the Puritan settlement. This man, who is dressed in a bear skin that brings to mind the bear Milton takes for "Cerberus" (66),[12] lives, like the mythical watch dog at the Gates of Hell, at the edge of the wilderness and considers himself as "neither Englishman nor native" (99). Indeed, he may be said to stand in diametrical opposition to Robinson Crusoe, the Puritan (or Hobbesian) solitary natural man reduced to bestial fear. Unlike Crusoe, Lusher is the solitary natural man who, like Tarzan, has developed a perfectly moral and intellectual code through the use of his reason. He has an extraordinary first-hand knowledge of the natives of the area (82); as Milton is horrified to learn, he has even "lived among the Indians" (100), and he believes that they are not degenerate and bestial savages, but rather have greater freedom and happiness and fewer vices than civilized man: "They can be vain and haughty, but they are not truly savage. They love society, even the wildest of them. They dote upon their children, too, spoiling them in everything" (98). Goosequill is likewise instinctively attracted to the Indians. He tries to communicate with them in their own language and on learning that "the natives distributed all . . . goods and materials equally among themselves," concludes that "these savages seem more just than the Englishmen" (131).

When questioned by Milton, the Indians turn out to have a well-developed and sound religion. They believe in a paternal and benevolent god, whom they do not need to worship "because they say that, being god, he will do them no harm" (134). Their "great god" is very

[12] Lusher's clothes also bring to mind the pioneer scout Natty Bumppo, the hero of the five novels of American frontier life by James Fenimore Cooper (1789–1851), nicknamed "Leatherstocking" after his deerskin leggings.

similar to the Christian God-the-Father; they also believe in a Christ-figure, who "wrought great miracles among them and prophesied truly . . . walked upon the waters [and was] said to have descended from heaven," and even conceive of heaven as the Christian paradise, "Always green and always flourishing" (136). However, for all these parallelisms, Milton condemns their faith and makes "a solemn covenant with God to root out heathen superstition" (137). Milton's narrow-mindedness and fanaticism take on sardonic overtones when, after being informed that "their god had created man and woman out of a tree," Milton retorts: "God took a rib from Adam and out of that rib he made one woman . . . . When Adam saw the woman, he said 'This is my bone'. You must forget your old superstitious stories" (138, 139).

The narrow-mindedness of Milton and his Particular Separatist Elect brings to mind William Blake's criticism of the Puritan writer. In *Milton, A Poem* (engraved 1804–1809), the visionary poet and engraver offers the author of *Paradise Lost* the possibility of returning from heaven to the earth in order to mend the errors committed in his earlier life. As Essick and Viscomi have pointed out, "In Blake's view, Milton's errors infected his life and writings with classical paganism, moral self-righteousness, and rational materialism" (1993: 16). For Blake, the use of the "single vision" of rational materialism (what he called "Newton's sleep")[13] is utterly reductionist and evil. He believed that Moses' Tablets of the Law were a "code of 'thou shalt nots' . . . a negative crime-and-punishment legalism . . . the antithesis of Christ's way of overcoming enemies by forgiving them" (13). He also thought that "the Jewish occupation of Canaan exemplified . . . the degeneration of a spiritual ideal into materialist conquest — a conversion of the Holy Land into the Bloody Land" (14). From Blake's perspective, then, Milton's attempt to transform New England into a new Canaan governed by the rational application of these laws would be utterly wrong, the proof that Milton was caught up in the snares of a punitive and evil God.

Blake's attitude of revolt against authority had already been developed in his revolutionary works, *The French Revolution* (1791), *America: A Prophecy* (1793), and *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* (1793). In *America*, Blake tells the story of the rebellion of the thirteen Ameri-

[13] Blake's belief that Milton suffered from the single vision of materialism brings to mind Eliot's contention that the "dissociation of sensibility" that took place in the seventeenth century "was aggravated by the influence of the two most powerful poets of the century, Milton and Dryden" (1979: 2305).

can colonies and the inexpert British response. As Ackroyd points out in the biography of Blake, in this poem, "Orc, the principle of energy and rebellion, stands against Urizen, who is tyrant, priest and lawgiver" (1995: 163). With Ackroyd's words in mind, we can draw a parallelism between Orc and Kempis, on the one hand, and between Milton and Urizen, on the other. Indeed, Orc's defense of liberty and rebelliousness against tyranny would have been endorsed by Kempis and his followers, who may be said to represent the Utopian and benevolent, but also the libertarian and revolutionary alternative to Milton's tyrannical model of society. What is more, the antagonism of the Catholics and Puritans in the novel — like that of Orc and Urizen in Blake's poem — may be said to have cosmic scope, for they share the black-and-white oppositional complementarity of the devils and angels in *Paradise Lost*. According to Goosequill, "the brethren were 'sickly pale' and . . . 'looking as tired as a bottle-head on Sunday morning'" (Ackroyd, 1996: 84). By contrast, Ralph Kempis is a "Fellow of sanguine humour. Face very large and ruddy like a bowl of cherries. Beard as red as the tail of a fox" (165). Milton thinks it is his duty to wear "a black gown and white band" (130). By contrast, the male inhabitants of Mary Mount, "Indian and English alike, were dressed in the strangest mixture of striped breeches, wide shirts and feathered caps; the women of the settlement preserved decorum by putting ribbons and colored bands across their hips and breasts, but otherwise, they dressed in the same fashion" (183). Although Milton abhors kings and homosexuals, his head reminds Goosequill of both: "He had long curled hair, like that of a king, and his face looked as finely made as a girl's" (23). What is more, the boy frequently refers to him as "His Majesty" (90) and as "sultan" (115), epithets reserved for Satan in *Paradise Lost* — "great sultan" (I: 348) and "monarch" (II: 467). The association of Milton with Satan is made explicit by Sarah Venn, the Catholic wife of a Puritan who is condemned by Milton for her faith, when she accuses him of being "the serpent" (213). By contrast, Ralph Kempis bears all the marks of his angelic origins. His name simultaneously evokes Raphael (the archangel God sent to warn Adam and Eve of the impending arrival of Satan), and Thomas à Kempis (1380–1471), the supposed author of *De Imitatione Christi*, one of Thomas More's most admired devotional texts and "perhaps the finest expression of a renovated piety, based upon austere communal living and prayer" (Ackroyd, 1998: 98). *De Imitatione Christi* traces the gradual progress of the soul to Christian perfection and its enormous popularity has been maintained in Catholic circles until this day.

Kempis's heavenly origins are also expressed by the fact that he has red hair, a trait which, within the logic of Ackroyd's recurrent symbolism, expresses his condition of star man, or *anthropos*, the cosmic man on whose shoulders rests the responsibility of restoring the lost harmony between man and cosmos. Likewise, from an Ackroydian perspective, the fact that Milton calls Kempis "fool" and also "clown" (231) would have a totally different meaning from the one intended by Milton. As we saw in the earlier novels, for Ackroyd the Fool is the archetypal figure on whose shoulders rests the pain and sorrow of the world, while clowns are visionaries or seers. Interestingly, Milton also calls Goosequill a clown (110) and even associates him to the Fool in the Tarot, carrying the heavy sack on his back. When he seemed distracted from the reading of the Scriptures, Milton "used to call out to me . . . 'Take up your pack-saddle, Goose, your day's work is now begun'" (118).

From this perspective, the fact that Goosequill's hair "always stands up straight" (25) rather than "a Tin-Tin quiff" (Miller, 1996: 16) would suggest a symbolic resemblance between Goosequill and Maquisa, the Powpow conjurer from Virginia with a "narrow crest of hair" (174). This conjurer, who shares rites with the Jesuit priests in Mary Mount, practices a kind of magic that is comparable to the natural or sympathetic magic practiced by Doctor Dee, with whom he is literally associated when Kempis's followers ask him to perform the leading role in *The London Magician* (182), "a comedy of prose and verse, written at the beginning of the seventeenth century, which concerned the mixed fortunes of a Cheapside conjuror in search of alchemical gold" (185). Indeed, Maquisa's astonishing magic — like the magic practiced by the *sachem* who cures Milton's broken leg when he gets lost in the forest — is not black, as Milton believes, but white, as suggested by its healing power and the "perfume of lily flower" in Maquisa's bag (174).

Goosequill's wife, Kate Jervis, who comes from Devon (the mythical land of Thomas Hardy and *First Light*), keeps alive and transmits through the popular airs she constantly sings to Jane, her little niece, the same kind of ancestral wisdom that Goosequill has inherited from the streets of London and that the Catholics of Mary Mount recognize in their fellow Indians. This common mythical ancestry is reflected, for example, in the "baptism of Mary Mount," a ceremony partly Catholic and partly Indian that involves the processional transportation of "a pair of antlers" (175) from the forest to the maypole, in a way that recalls the ancestral ceremony with another pair of antlers celebrated by

the Mint family in *First Light*, as well as the commemoration of St. Paul in late fifteenth-century England.[14]

In Milton's version of Eden in *Paradise Lost*, Adam and Eve enjoy perfectly innocent and pure sexual pleasure but only until they commit their fatal act of disobedience, whose immediate effect is to make them feel shame and seek to cover their nakedness (Book IX). Although when he arrives in America, Milton is already an old man and has "a body so white and pure that it showed no signs of ageing" (76), yet he is ashamed of his nakedness (76), and, although he is still stirred by sex, he considers it sinful and evil: "The fruit of lechery is woe, yet I am tempted still" (5). However, though quick to condemn others, Milton finds himself constantly falling into the temptations he represses. He banishes music and dancing from New Milton, but cannot refrain from playing the "portative organ" he finds in the *Gabriel*, where he (like the Merry Mount settlers) indulges in singing "Our good English airs" with the deftness of "a ballad-seller" (41). When he hears Kate Jervis's beautiful voice singing her native Devon songs, Milton is enchanted and concludes that "she must be handsome" (115). It is then that he decides to employ her as his servant and asks her to tend the flowers in his garden. For Milton, Kate Jervis's innocence and beauty is that of "our mother Eve before she conversed with the serpent" (118). Indeed, Kate, who is always carrying in her arms her little niece, Jane, whose mother drowned during the journey to America, constitutes an apposite living emblem of Eve/Mary, the universal wife/virginal mother of mankind.

Under the beneficial influence of Kate, Milton momentarily forgets his repressive policy. He takes to his cabin "a pair of virginals" newly arrived from Dorset (119) and "he began to sing in his sweet sad voice which . . . seems to fit with all the sounds of the wilderness" (120). Under Kate's care, Milton's garden becomes such a source of solace and pleasure for the blind man that he even considers the possibility of "plant[ing] an apple tree in the garden" (121). However, Milton's attitude will change soon after, when a rattlesnake enters his cabin and reduces him to a state of "panic fear" (125). The first part of the novel, "Eden," ends at this stage, with Milton getting lost and disappearing in the forest, while Kate and Goosequill fall in love and enjoy "perfectly

[14] "On the feast day of the commemoration of St Paul, a buck was brought to the high altar; it was then killed and its head fixed upon a pole for a procession to the west door, at which time horns were blown through the city" (Ackroyd, 1998: 112).

natural" (141) sexuality, in a faithful replica of Adam and Eve's sexual bliss before the Fall, or also of the Lovers in the Tarot, a card that symbolizes the balance and union of opposites. Goosequill's description of their love-making as "Our own wooden O" (141) succinctly and accurately expresses the utter spiritual and physical perfection of this love, for, like the Fool Goosequill incarnates, their love-making contains all qualities and yet has no qualities:

> The Fool is a symbol of foolishness or madness, but his is a divine folly . . . . And the Fool is also the perfected spirit of man approaching the One. The One pervades all things and is free of all limitations. It contains all qualities and yet it has no qualities, for to ascribe any quality to it is to limit it. *The Fool is the o which contains all things but is no-thing.* (Cavendish, 1984: 114. My emphasis)

Goosequill's phrase echoes the prologue of Shakespeare's *Henry V*, when the Chorus refers to the Globe as "this wooden O" and self-consciously wonders about the capacity of "this cockpit [to] hold/ The vasty fields of France" (lines 11–12). This intertextual and metafictional wink draws attention both to the materiality of the expression itself, that is, to its condition of inherited linguistic construction, and to the fictionality of the young couple's love. Therefore, the phrase manages to suggest simultaneously the "roundness" and perfection of their "O love" and its condition of "empty" word-play, neatly expressing its contradictory "all things/no-thing" nature.

On 20th December 1661 Milton goes out for a walk and disappears into the forest. When he returns after six weeks (160), he promulgates even more repressive rules for New Milton and becomes obsessed with the idea of declaring war on the Catholic settlement. He never says a word about what has happened to him in the forest but it is evident to Goosequill that he has undergone a change for the worse, which involves a process of isolation: "He grew apart, something happened" (268). The reader, however, has access to what happened to Milton in the wilderness in a series of chapters narrated by Milton's voice split into the first- and the third-person, an awkward alternation of narrative voices that is reminiscent of the split of Milton into a sleep-walking "Shadow" and his "immortal Self" that is found on plate 14 of Blake's *Milton: A Poem*.[15]

[15] "As when a man dreams, he reflects not that his body sleeps,/ Else he would wake; so seem'd he entering his Shadow: but/ With him the Spirits of the Seven Angels of the Presence/ Entering; they gave him still perceptions

After losing his way in the forest, Milton falls into an Indian deer trap and suddenly finds himself "hanging from a pole [suspended] between earth and heaven . . . . His dark world turned upside down" (158). He discovers in amazement that he can see (159). In other words, Milton finds himself in the position of the Hanged Man, one of the major arcana of the Tarot:

> The Hanged Man swings limply from a gibbet, head downwards, with two bags of gold dangling from his hands and on his face an expression of pleased serenity. He is passion spent, the completion of a process . . . . In the process of the Hanged Man the magician is drowned in the floodtides of his inner being. The false self which is destroyed is the whole "higher" structure of outlook, attitudes, tastes, acquired mental and emotional habits, which cages the inner man. In a reversal of values — the Hanged Man is upside down on his gibbet — this structure is overturned and fragmented to release the waters of the depths. These waters are fertile. They carry the seed of new life, of something within the magician which is potentially his true self.
>
> (Cavendish, 1984: 108–9).

Falling into the trap, therefore, Milton reaches the fulcrum in his self-assumed physical and spiritual quest for illumination, the climactic moment when a great awakening is possible, when he can choose to kill and purge the false self that precedes the creation of the true, inner self, as the recovery of his sight suggests. Rescued by the Powpows, the poet is shown how "the skin of a snake . . . changed into a live serpent which cured [an ailing woman]" and he himself experiences the soothing and healing power of the *sachem*'s sympathetic magic (Ackroyd, 1996: 216–17). However, Milton stubbornly refuses to accept these magical practices as good and concludes that these "rare cures in the wilderness must surely be the work of the devil" (217). The poet is even invited to Wachuset, the sacred head/mountain (or Self/World) where their ancestors lie buried in the perpetual ice of a "lake of clear water." This sacred mountain, the stones of whose slopes had been "piled upon one another like some staircase" (like Doctor Dee's mythical stone stairs), is a veritable *axis mundi*, with its *omphalos*-like "wondrous stone . . . larger than an egg [which] at night gave out a light by which you could find your way" (220, 221). Milton climbs to the top of this mountain, accompanied by Eleazar Lusher, who acts as his interpreter and guide.

of his Sleeping Body:/ Which now arose and walk'd with them in Eden, as an Eighth/ Image Divine tho' darken'd; and tho' walking as one walks/ In sleep: and the Seven comforted and supported him" (Plate 14: 1–7).

This function of the beaver hunter links him to the archangel Raphael in *Paradise Lost*, who is sent by God to warn Adam of Satan's intentions and to admonish him on the need for his obedience (Book V). It also links him to Raphael in the Apocryphal *Book of Tobit* in which the archangel guides Tobias on a journey that ends with the curing of Tobias's blindness. But Lusher is also like Sagittarius, the Huntsman in the Tarot, to whom he is linked through the "Cerberus" skin he wears and the love he professes to his wolf-dog (99). As Cavendish explains, "The horse and the dog are the huntsman's animals and also stand for the passage from lower to higher, because they have been trained to help man. The hunter's chase is for knowledge, the discovery of the central driving force deep in one's own nature" (1984: 107).[16]

Lusher/the Huntsman is therefore the angelic/mythical guide sent to help Milton make correct use of his free will. Contemplating the smiling warriors buried in the ice, Milton realizes that he is "among Druids. Seeking ancient temples" (Ackroyd, 1996: 220). Lusher explains to him that they are "many hundreds or even thousands of years old," that they are (like the "Old Barren One" in *First Light*) "worshipped as spirits," and that the Indians "have made a covenant with death, and with eternity [they] are in agreement" (223). However, Milton refuses to renounce his Puritan preconceptions and curtly dismisses the whole experience: "but surely immortality must come in some other guise than this? To freeze for eternity, with no hope of thaw?" (223). The obvious implication is that Ackroyd's Milton, like Milton's Satan, prefers to roast in hell. In other words, unlike Tobias, but very much like Satan, Milton prefers the self-imposed blindness of his own materialism, and, incapable of admitting his error, he proudly sacrifices his true inner self, preferring to reign in a (Puritan) Hell of his own devising rather than accept the leadership of Kempis and the Powpow *sachems* in (a Catholic/Indian) Heaven.

Analyzing the figure of Satan in *Paradise Lost*, C. S. Lewis has noted that "Satan in his speech shows complete inability to conceive any state of mind but the infernal" (1975: 98), and he points out how Satan exemplifies "the horrible co-existence of a subtle and incessant intellectual activity with an incapacity to understand anything" (99). These words would perfectly describe Milton's flaw. His incapacity to think otherwise than infernally reaches its climax during the Indian "feast of

[16] The symbolic function of Lusher and his dog is similar to that of the red-haired tramp with a dog who leads the way to the holy city in *The House of Doctor Dee*. Cf. chapter 3.

dreams," an episode that closely resembles the experience of the Tarot quester in stage 7, the Chariot:

> The Chariot parallels the Hanged Man on a higher scale. In this "death" the adept is not submerged in his own inner depths but in the life of the universe. To reach the godhead, he must destroy himself as an individual and identify himself with the universe, which is God. He annihilates his mortal, human personality and returns to the womb of Binah or Babalon, the Mother of All, who is also the Whore. This is the alchemical process of "exaltation", the making of the philosopher's Stone, the absorption of man into the divine. It is achieved through an emotional and spiritual frenzy, which rises to a peak of ecstasy when the magician is flung out beyond the bounds of his own being into communion with all things. (Cavendish, 1984:110).

The feast of dreams or *Ononhara*, which Milton associates with the Greek word *oneirein* (to dream) (Ackroyd, 1996: 265), begins with the induction of a state of frenzy by means of the "horrid clamour [produced by the beating of] metal dishes and [the imitation] of the cries of wild beasts . . . [of] laughing and singing" (265–66). It continues with the drinking of *isquout*, "a distilled spirit mixed with certain herbs [that] has a sweet taste" and makes Milton "merry" (274) and ends, like the Chariot process, with the offer of an Indian maid who has the "virgin majesty" of Eve, the Mother of Humankind and yet is also for Milton a "sorceress [and] a lustful strumpet" (275), the incarnation of Babalon, the universal Whore.

Mr. Lusher tells Milton that the feast of dreams is aimed at granting "satisfaction of any secret wish that has been vouchsafed to them [the Indians] in their wild dreams" (266), and it may be said that Milton fulfils his most repressed dream of all, for in his frenzy he imagines himself in "Eden. Paradise" (275) with Eve, the "fair defect of nature" (274). However, when he awakes and realizes what he has done, he mistakes superior love, or *agape*, for inferior love, or *eros*, as he takes the pure prelapsarian "mix[ture of] soul with soul, or flesh with flesh" offered by the Indian virgin for guilty sex, "the cause of all his woe" (275).

The incapacity to annihilate his mortal, human personality and to return to the womb of the universal Mother/Whore brings about the return of Milton's (physical and spiritual) blindness as well as his self-fragmentation into (to adapt Blake's words) a "sleep-walking body" and (a condemned) "immortal Self," expressed in Milton's narrative voice split into the first and the third person. At this stage, therefore, Milton reaches the point of no return, when the quester incapable of

being reborn into a new spiritual life becomes a "Black Brother isolated from the rest of the universe in the hard and evil shell of his own egotism." Deprived of spiritual nourishment, "Such a being is gradually disintegrated . . . . He may indeed prosper for a while, but in the end he must perish" (Cavendish, 1984: 111).

After his return from the Indian camp, Milton asks Kate to uproot the flowers in the garden and to plant the "herbs alphabetically" (Ackroyd, 1996: 161), thus transforming Kate's Edenic "garden of love" (104) into a replica of Milton's hierarchically ordered garden of Eden in *Paradise Lost* (V: 480–85). It is then that he promulgates a series of drastically punitive and repressive laws, for, as with Satan, Milton's "knowledge that [he has] betrayed what [he] valued most is unbearable [and he hopes that] perhaps furious enmity against it will drown the knowledge" (Lewis, 1975: 105). Blinded by hatred and fury, Milton subsequently undertakes a tour of the main Puritan towns in New England in order to "raise an army of the Lord utterly to destroy [the] papists" of Mary Mount (Ackroyd, 1996: 242). The way in which Milton "instilled malice into thousands" (255) and uses unnecessary and disproportionate "cannon" in the battle against the Catholics and Indians is reminiscent of Satan's "devilish engines" and tactics, while Kempis's attempts to avoid bloodshed by substituting direct confrontation for guerilla skirmishes and booby traps (263), may be said to echo Michael's superior tactics in the battle for the recovery of Heaven in *Paradise Lost* (Book VI). In Milton's poem, this three-day battle ends with the glorious victory of the Messiah. By contrast, in Ackroyd's version, Mary Mount is destroyed, and Ralph Kempis and Goosequill die, together with most of the Catholics, while the Indians are unmercifully massacred. What is more, at the end of the novel, Milton's immortal Self is left sadly narrating how his own sleep-walking Shadow, condemned like Adam (and The Lord of the May in Hawthorne's sketch) but without the consoling company of Eve (or the Lady of the May), "wandered ahead and, weeping, through the dark wood took his solitary way" (277).[17]

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[17] Besides the intertextual echoes of *Paradise Lost* and "The Maypole of Merry Mount," this ending also strikingly recalls the four lines in the first copy of *America* that Blake erased so they would not be printed: "The stern Bard [Blake] ceas'd, asham'd of his own song; enrag'd he swung/ His harp aloft sounding, then dash'd its shining frame against/ A ruin'd pillar in glittering fragments silent he turn'd away,/ And wander'd down among the vales of Kent in sick & drear lamenting" (Ackroyd, 1995: 165).

Thus, the novel seems to end with Milton's imposition of Doctor Dee's hellish "World Without Love." However, Kate, the sweet advocate of the "World of Love," her niece Jane, and also Kate's little child by Goosequill have survived. And we could say that the death of Kempis/Michael anticipates the sacrifice of Christ, while the death of Milton's pupil is in keeping with the *akedah*, the sacrifice of Isaac by his father Abraham, a recurrent topos in the American historical romance, which, according to Emily Miller Budick, "defined and guaranteed the essential movement of American history, from its exodus from England through its entry into Canaan to its establishment of a Puritan theocracy in the New World. The moment of the akedah, then, is the point at which Old Testament, New Testament, and American history begins and begins anew or ought to begin" (1989: 37). Vieland and the other Abraham figures in the American historical romances expected to establish a Puritan theocracy through the sacrifice of their sons but achieved instead personal and communal disaster. Likewise, Milton's victory over Goosequill and Kempis is Pyrrhic, for, as the angels point out in *Paradise Lost*, whoever tries to rebel against God brings about a result that is the opposite of what he or she intends (VII: 613).

During the tour of New England in order to raise an army, Milton's Indian spy, fittingly named Ezekiel after Milton's favourite prophet, draws Milton's attention to the fact that the town of Dorchester they are approaching "seemed to take the form of a serpent" (245). Horrified by this, Milton decides that they "cannot ride into the maw of the serpent's image" (Ackroyd, 1996: 246) and asks Ezekiel to find a different route. When they arrive in Boston, Milton meets Outspoken Mather, the fictional epigone of Increase Mather, the Rector of Harvard mentioned by Hawthorne in *The Scarlet Letter*,[18] who tells Milton that their "great city is taken to be in the form of a heart" (247). On hearing this, Milton "reflected upon the shape of the serpent within Dorchester, together with the shape of the heart in this place, and for a moment . . . the whole land of New England seemed to me as the painted body of an Indian." For Milton the vision is terrifying, for he interprets it as "the devil's image" and symbolizes for him the prevalence of the hellish "wilderness" that he is trying to eradicate (247). It is after this shattering experience that Milton encounters in Harvard

[18] In Boston, Milton also meets T. S. Eliot's ancestor, John Eliot (246), who was, like the Presbyterian Divine Cotton Mather and also like Hawthorne's ancestor, the magistrate John Hathorne, involved in the trials of the Salem witches.

Library a young man called Thornton, who is writing an epic poem entitled *Paradise Regained*, "celebrat[ing] his country [on] the model of *The Faerie Queen*" (252).

Although the novel ends with the bleak prospect of Milton's Separatist rule spreading over New England, this apparently innocent intertextual joke may hide a more optimistic symbolic meaning. Ackroyd's mythical conception of time and Adam's astonished discovery at the end of *Paradise Lost* that "all this good of evil shall produce" (XII: 470), suggest that the subject matter of Thornton's poem can only be the story of the eventual restoration of Edenic happiness and pleasure in the mythical giant Self/World of New England.

Peter Ackroyd's latest biography to date, *The Life of Thomas More*, published at the end of February 1998, soon became number one in the list of bestsellers after being unanimously praised by its reviewers. Diarmaid MacCulloch, for example, called it a "richly enjoyable book" (1998: 4), while Keith Thomas described it as "a marvellously rich biography" in the tradition established by "Sir Anthony Kenny's attractive *Past Master*" (1996: 14). Like *Blake*, *The Life of Thomas More* is indispensable for a good understanding of *Milton in America*, not only because, following a long-established habit, Ackroyd wrote part of *Milton in America* while researching for the biography of More, but also, and most importantly, because this biography rounds off the quasi-archaeological search he started as a post-graduate student at Yale University (1971–1973), twenty-seven years earlier, when he set out to gather material for his critical study, *Notes for a New Culture* (1976). Time and again, Ackroyd has reminded his interviewers that "England has been Catholic for 1,500 years and has only been Protestant for 400," and that he is "very interested to rediscover the Catholic roots of English culture," as well as what he calls, "the latent Catholicism of the English race" (Onega, 1996: 214). Rearranging his novels and biographies diachronically, it is easy to see that Ackroyd has been constantly moving backward, each time focusing his attention on an earlier historical period within these 400 years, often comparing them with the author's present and, more often than not, focusing on the fringes of the dominant culture within the chosen period, in order to find the "latent" traces of the minority visionary culture that Ackroyd cherishes as his own.[19] Thus, from his initial interest in canonical Modernists such

[19] The temptation to compare Ackroyd with Mark Clare, the archaeologist in *First Light* who unearths the prehistoric tumulus digging across historical and geological layers, is irresistible.

as Pound and Eliot, he moves to the recreation of the life of Oscar Wilde, the ideological scapegoat of the Modernist period. He then goes back to the nineteenth century, where his interest in visionary writers such as Dickens and Blake is combined with a great fascination for music-hall comedians such as Dan Leno, for mesmerists such as Daniel Home, and for serial killers such as Jack the Ripper. Further back to the eighteenth century, he focuses on Thomas Chatterton, the young plagiarist whose fame was based on a Romantic construction built on his untimely death. Even when he chooses rationalist characters such as Nicholas Hawksmoor and Sir Christopher Wren, it is in fact to use them as a pretext to delve into the magical practices coexisting with empiricism during the Enlightenment. Following a similar pendular logic, Ackroyd likewise moves from the recreation of the life of the most famous Elizabethan magus, Doctor John Dee, to that of John Milton, Dee's polar opposite as a qualified representative of seventeenth-century Puritanism.

These historical figures are the pieces of an imaginary jigsaw puzzle diachronically mapping the "Cockney visionary sensibility," which, according to Ackroyd, constitutes the best expression of "the latent Catholicism of the English race." With their strong sense of transcendence nourished by a faith that freely combines mythical, magical, and religious elements, each of these visionary characters helps Ackroyd confirm the survival in England of the fifteen-hundred-year-old Catholic culture that was supposed to have come to an abrupt end after the Reformation. It is no wonder, then, that in his latest biography, Ackroyd should take a further step backward in time, in order to recreate the life of Thomas More (1478?–1535), a key witness to the historical events that led to Henry VIII's rejection of the authority of the Pope, and also, indeed, "the first English layman to be beatified as a martyr" (Ackroyd, 1998: 395).

In *The Life of Thomas More*, Ackroyd draws an accurate picture not only of More's life and work, but also of the world he lived in, which was that of late medieval Catholic England. It was a wholly regulated world, aspiring to perfect hierarchical subordination and symmetry, a world in which "each member of the body politic remained within the appropriate state, or order, or degree" (8), and where well-to-do children like More were encouraged to pursue philosophical truth as the way to wisdom (24), while at the same time they were instructed in the

arts of *suasoria* and *prosopopoeia*[20] a world, that is, used to reconciling opposites, where children were trained to consider matters from different perspectives, and where the material and the spiritual worlds were considered to be the visible and the invisible parts of a single reality. Inevitably, in this world of dualities, "the appetite for order and hierarchy is matched only by the tendency towards disorder or violent disruption. These opposing forces were held together by bringing them both within the rituals of display and seasonal ceremony" (58). We have seen how, in keeping with this contradictory tendency for order and disorder, for rule and misrule, the Mary Mount settlers in *Milton in America* combined religiosity with seasonal revelry. The same tendency would explain the apparently contradictory facts that such a pious Catholic as Henry VIII's first wife, Catherine of Aragon, would wholeheartedly participate in the May Day revels, even though she "attended Mass each day and spent several hours in her private chapel, kneeling in prayer upon its stone floor." Or the fact that she would usually wear "the habit of the third order of St Francis" under her robes of state (195), like Sir Thomas More himself, who wore a penitential hair shirt all his life. Or again, why for all the reverential respect paid to the law in Pre-Reformation England,[21] it was in Lincoln Inn itself that a "lord of misrule supervised the festivities of Christmas, which included masques and plays" (58).

The election of one of the most respected lawyers as lord of misrule is good proof that human law was not just a set of utilitarian rules, just as Catholic Europe was not a simple aggregate of nations, or the Church a simple aggregate of believers. Catholic Europe was the material body of Christ, and human law the reflection of Divine Law, in the same way that the Church was nothing less than "the mystical body of Christ, comprising the living and the dead . . . the vehicle of God's purpose and the paradigm for all earthly law and authority" (275). Consequently, the Church taught that there were "laws of custom and the law of nature" (60) and that human law was "to be part of religion, or even religion to be part of law" (59). Therefore, as Ackroyd notes, "when Luther argued that law was written within the heart of man, and

[20] "One was concerned with the construction of convincing arguments for both sides of a debating topic, the other with the assumption of a character — fictional or real — to create a fluent and persuasive discourse" (Ackroyd, 1998: 30).

[21] A favorite metaphor of the period considered "the temporal and the spiritual jurisdiction as being two edges of the same sword" (Ackroyd, 1998: 59).

that judges should ignore matters of precedent and tradition, he was assaulting the principles by which More's life and career were guided" (60). Indeed, from a Catholic perspective, the Protestants' attempts to deny the authority of the church and to interpret the inherited dogmas individually could only be interpreted as evidence of the coming of the Antichrist and the approach of Doomsday.

Ackroyd makes an important point when he notes that the basic difference between Post-Reformation and Catholic culture lies in "the great moments of Protestant affirmation," expressed for example in Martin Luther's words: "Here I stand. Here I remain. Here I glory. Here I triumph" (225). From Luther's exultant affirmation of selfhood to the Cartesian *cogito* and the materialistic "single vision" Blake called "Newton's sleep," there are only two further logical steps in the same direction. In other words, More's Catholic faith was a faith based on order and ritual, where the individual conscience was led by the unchallenged historical authority of the church, while Luther's faith was that of the Renaissance Christian, a faith fully possessed of the authentic voice of the free individual conscience of man. This is the ideological crux that cost Thomas More his life. Indeed, More's refusal to take the oath of succession would be wrongly interpreted as a stubborn attempt to assert his free will against that of the king. If it had been only that, More would never have had the courage to face a death that terrified him.[22] When asked by the Abbot of Westminster "to estimate the weight of his conscience, when opposed by so many of the clergy and the parliament . . . More answered that he could claim in his support 'the general counsail of Christendom.'" As Ackroyd points out: "This was his central argument; the derivation of 'conscience' suggests knowledge-with-others, which for More included the communion of the dead as well as the living. It was this understanding which afforded him the strength and confidence to continue what seemed, to almost everyone, a foolish and futile struggle" (354).

[22] As a traitor, More was sentenced to "be drawn on a hurdle through the City of London to Tyburn, there to be hanged till you be half dead, after that cut down yet alive, your bowels to be taken out of your body and burned before you, your privy parts put off, your head cut off, your body to be divided in four parts and your head and body to be set at such places as the King shall assign" (Ackroyd, 1998: 387). Eventually, however, the king commuted his sentence to beheading: "He was killed with one stroke of the axe" (395).

More's answer points to one of the most important sources of disagreement between the Catholics and Lutherans at the time of the Reformation, the question of whether the true state is a congregation of believers ruled by the intervention of grace and divine law or just an association of men ruled by national law and positive law (102). It is clear from his answer to the Abbot that More considered himself to be part of a larger spiritual community, including the living and the dead. As Ackroyd explains, for Thomas More the body of Christ "was considered not only to be the transubstantiated host, but also the entire Catholic Church from its beginning in human history," and there is evidence in his writings that he thought "of Christian society making up one physical body." Ackroyd interprets this, in words that bring to mind Doctor Dee's and Blake's mystical visions of London, as "a symbolic and imaginative order in which Christ, the eucharist and the Church partake of the flesh and the blood and are incarnated in the heart of the city" (110, 111). It was only the desire to maintain himself within this mystic body that gave More courage to face the ostracism of his family and his physical death. His human fears conquered by prayer and hardship, More, like Ackroyd's visionary characters, eventually reached the childlike condition that, for Ackroyd, symbolizes the annihilation of the self: "'God maketh me a wanton, and setteth me on His lap and dandled me.' He had become a child again, supported and protected by his true father" (365). These are More's last words to his daughter Margaret. They neatly synthesize More's achievement of what T. S. Eliot memorably described as "A condition of complete simplicity/ (Costing no less than everything)," granting him his Shantih: "The Peace which passeth understanding" (Eliot, 1974: 223, 86).

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Conclusion

IN THE INTRODUCTION WE PLACED Peter Ackroyd's novels within "historiographic metafiction," the world-wide trend that, according to Linda Hutcheon, is the only literary trend that really fulfils the contradictory poetics of postmodernism. Ackroyd's nine novels meet all the requirements of historiographic metafiction: all of them are self-conscious and parodic novels that level history and literature to the same status of human construct, expressing "a longing for the traditional relish in story telling while simultaneously underlining the fact that this return is problematic" (Hutcheon, 1988: 124–25). However, Ackroyd's historiographic metafictions are quite different from those written by other contemporary writers, in the sense that they are suffused with an innately English sensibility, which Ackroyd himself has described as a "Cockney visionary sensibility" (Ackroyd, 1993a).

We have seen how, in his biographies of Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot, Ackroyd analyzes the way in which the high modernist poets attempted to find a way out of the modernist prison of language through the recovery of fragmentary perceptions of the history, literature, and culture of the past and their organization into an overall pattern that would reveal glimpses of a transcendental, sublime Truth. We have also seen how Ackroyd, following their example, attempts to recover fragmentary perceptions of the history, literature, and culture of England in his novels. He situates them in the historical past and recreates historical figures such as Oscar Wilde, Thomas Chatterton, Nicholas Hawksmoor, Sir Christopher Wren, John Dee, Dan Leno, Karl Marx, George Gissing, and John Milton. At the same time, however, in keeping with Ackroyd's belief that language can only signify itself and that the text preexists writers and readers alike, the world created in these novels is often presented as overtly fictional and derivative, an intertextual world made up of the voices, styles, and ideas of Ackroyd's favourite predecessors, including Blake, Chatterton, Defoe, Dickens, Eliot, Hardy, Hawthorne, Joyce, Milton, Thomas More, Pound, and Wilde, besides those of contemporary writers, such as John Fowles or Iain Sinclair. Following Pound and Eliot, Ackroyd attempts to reconcile and unify these two elements, the historical and the fictional, at a third, mythical level. However, as Ackroyd himself has pointed out, the

problem with this scheme is that it presupposes an act of faith, the postulation of an absolute Logos, existing on a metaphysical plane beyond or above the textual plane (Ackroyd, 1989: 70).

Reading the novels in chronological order it is easy to see that in the earlier novels Ackroyd is reluctant to pledge his faith in the existence of this transcendental plane of existence, with the result that the metafictional element dominates over the mythical. In *The Great Fire of London* (1984a) the historical and literary ontologies are given the same status: real and fictional characters, and real and fictional authors exist at the same (textual) level, while the novel itself may be described as a parodic and self-conscious misreading of Dickens's *Little Dorrit*, containing *en abyme* the equally subjective and distorted versions of *Little Dorrit* made up by various characters involved in the project of filming Dickens's novel. Indeed, *The Great Fire of London* shows Ackroyd's incapacity to find a way out of the modernist prison of language. The novel is a closed and autonomous linguistic universe, a Borgesian Library of Babel, endlessly yielding different versions of itself and constantly begetting and trapping within itself "real" and "unreal" characters and authors alike.

In *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde* (1984b) the metafictional element still predominates. Ackroyd blurs the generic boundaries between history, biography and fiction, in order to write a "fictional autobiography" of Oscar Wilde in Wilde's own voice and style. At the end of the novel, the Irish writer and aesthete is fully aware that, after his death, his life will be distorted into the contradictory and subjective versions of his biographers. However, Wilde prefers these literary misreadings to the original version of his life, because he believes Art to be a life-giving and superior form of reality, and he dies laughing, imagining his migration to an abstract and absolute World of Art made up of the sum total of the voices and visions of the artists and thinkers in Western culture. From Wilde's aestheticist perspective, there is no doubt that the Irish writer has transcended mortality and goes on living in *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde*, the textual plane of being into which Wilde has managed to make his transcendental escape, even if in purely Horatian terms, achieving immortality through writing. Therefore, Wilde's aestheticism offers Ackroyd a way out of the modernist prison of language without the need to postulate the existence of a metaphysical plane of being beyond the textual realm itself.

We have seen how, in keeping with his modernist outlook on language, Ackroyd considers every kind of writing to be simply the free play of language, sees his evolution from poetry to biography and fiction writing as complementary aspects of the same activity, and readily admits that his need to absorb and recast the "traces" of past writers has always been part of his creative imagination. This admission by Ackroyd brings to the fore the contemporary writer's awareness that no particular text can be original in the sense that the text exists in a discursive space whose preexisting codes and conventions determine the text's intelligibility and condition the reader's and even the writer's approach to it. According to Harold Bloom, this knowledge often produces in the would-be writer a tension he calls "the anxiety of influence" (1993), the pressure exerted on the young writer by the bulk of the literary tradition that he must assimilate and recast. Interestingly, however, Ackroyd rejects this explanation of his need to absorb and recast the "traces" of past writers, insisting that it has nothing to do with any kind of pressure, that he "didn't feel what Bloom calls 'anxiety of influence,' nothing of that kind at all" (Onega, 1996: 212).

In the introduction to *William Blake and the Moderns*, a book on the influence of Blake on twentieth-century writers, Robert J. Bertholf and Annette S. Levitt contend — like Ackroyd — that Blake's influence on contemporary writers such as Walt Whitman, Allen Ginsberg, D. H. Lawrence, and Doris Lessing cannot be explained through Harold Bloom's theory of the anxiety of influence. They say that what the younger writer really seeks out, both consciously and unconsciously, is "influences, attunements and disruptions that provoke his engagement in a literary history of recurring forms," and that, for Blake (and we may add, for Peter Ackroyd), the history of literature is a history of the particular forms generated by each succeeding poet to present a common vision, so that, "If Blake had not taken up Milton's *Paradise Lost*, for example, as a projection of what he called 'The One Central Form,' that omission would have been an indication that Milton's poem had so mismanaged itself that it was not part of the common form of the imagination's life" (1982: x).

William Blake considered *Paradise Lost* an important manifestation of the Central Form of the imagination. However, he also believed that John Milton suffered from the single vision of rational materialism, which he considered utterly reductionist and evil. Therefore, in *Milton, a Poem* (1993), Blake writes his particular version of the Central Form of the imagination in reaction to Milton's own version in *Paradise Lost*. He imagines Milton's return from heaven to earth, in order to mend the errors committed in his earlier life. In the same way, Ackroyd, in *Milton in America* (1996a), acknowledges the influence of Blake and Milton, giving their versions of the Central Form in *Paradise Lost* and

in *Milton, a Poem* (as well as in Blake's *America: A Prophecy*) a further turn of the screw. He makes Milton return, this time to the New World, in order to build a Puritan paradise in New England.

Milton, who, like the Satan of *Paradise Lost*, suffers from an unassuaged materialist single vision, organizes the Puritan settlement according to strict repressive laws and the Manichaean separation of the "elect" from the "evil." Ackroyd's alternative to this hellish world is Mary Mount, the nearby Catholic settlement, a carnivalesque world that, like that of Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Merry Mount" and also that of Thomas More's *Utopia*, is built on social egalitarianism, interracial tolerance, and preternatural merriment. The Catholics and Indians in Mary Mount enjoy the double vision of what Ackroyd would call the true "Cockney visionary sensibility" (1993a). Theirs is a culture with millenarian pagan roots expressed in their love of ritual, spectacle, and symbolism; the same culture that, according to Ackroyd, still suffuses the comic traditions of pantomime, vaudeville, and music hall.

To sum up: with *Milton in America* in mind we can better understand Ackroyd's insistence on the existence of "patterns of continuity" (also called "morphic resonances") in the building of common national images in English literature, and why it is he contends in "The Englishness of English Literature" that, for all the denials of some contemporary critics, the true English sensibility is best expressed in the work of energetic and individualist writers such as Sidney, Milton, Sterne, Gay, Blake, Chatterton, Dickens, and Orwell, all of whom share a concept of creativity based upon imitation in Blake's sense of the word, that is, as "the individual adaptation and reinterpretation of the best literary works in existence" (Ackroyd, 1996b: 17).

Harold Bloom conceives the anxiety of influence in Oedipal terms as a romantic struggle for affirmation of original authorship. Consequently, in *Chatterton* (1988a) we find two characters suffering from writer's block as a result of their incapacity to make their individual voices heard against the voices of their strong predecessors. One of them, Philip Slack, has given up writing his only novel after realizing that he cannot recognize his own voice in his writing (70). The other writer, Charles Wychwood, is an unpublished poet whose anxiety of influence is complicated by the effects of terminal brain cancer.

Thomas Chatterton, the eighteenth-century writer considered to be the greatest plagiarist in history, liberates Charles and Philip from their anxiety of influence at the end of the novel, when they are persuaded to abandon their bias for authorial originality in favor of Chatterton's insight, summarized by Wychwood, that "original genius consists in

forming new and happy combinations, rather than in searching after thoughts and ideas which had never occurred before" (Ackroyd, 1996b: 58). Chatterton's proposal is that they absorb and recast the literary forms of the past, not in order to assert their individuality and originality against the work of their strongest predecessors (as Harold Bloom would contend), but rather, in line with Blake, to find the "patterns of continuity" that would provide them with "the right kind of national image" (13); for, as Bertholf and Levitt (following Blake) note, "if there is only One Central Form of the imagination, then the possibilities of imaginative literature are manifestations of that central form" (1982: xi).[1] From this perspective, Chatterton's claim to originality, like Blake's and Ackroyd's — and also like Pound's call to "make it new" — does not involve a rejection of the past, but rather a call for re-vision, a recasting of the One Central Form into the active forms of the present by the exertion of the individual writer's freedom of imagination.

After accepting Chatterton's proposal, Charles Wychwood — like Wilde — meets George Meredith and Thomas Chatterton in the World of Art, at the atemporal moment of their deaths, joining their hands in a scene that foreshadows Ackroyd's own concept of "English Music" and brings to mind Borges's notion of supra-individual Subjectivity/Authorship.[2] In other words, Charles (like Philip) overcomes his anxiety of influence when he recuperates through Chatterton the medieval definition of imitation as a creative act of interpretation rather than as devaluing plagiarism.

Charles Wychwood's — and Ackroyd's — rejection of the Bloomian (or "humanist" in Ackroyd's sense of the word) notion of original authorship in favor of the medieval (or Blakean, Borgesian, and also "modernist," in Ackroyd's terminology) notion of shared subjectivity/

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[1] Blake's position recalls T. S. Eliot's idea, expressed in "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1979), that the existing monuments of literature form an ideal order among themselves and are not simply an aggregate of the writings of individuals. It also brings to mind the principle around which Northrop Frye's literary theory is developed in *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957), or also Joseph Campbell's concept of the "monomyth" (1973).

[2] For example, Borges's "Tlön, Uqbar, Urbis Tertius" is a world in which "The concept of plagiarism does not exist . . . all the works are the work of a single author, who is atemporal and anonymous . . . . The [books] of fiction deal with a single argument, with all imaginable permutations." (Borges, 1989: 439. My translation).

authorship has an interesting theoretical implication: the recuperation of the mimetic function of writing automatically presupposes the existence of an original, divine Book (or, in Blake's terms, One Central Form), of which each human book can only be the mimetic form created by each individual imagination. In other words, it takes for granted the medieval dual interpretation of the book as imaginative and spiritual labyrinth.[3] From this perspective, the World of Art that Charles Wychwood enters may be said to have a fictional and spiritual double nature, as Wychwood suggests when he observes that, although only "a dream of wholeness, and of beauty, . . . the vision is real, [and] all the unhappiness and all the sickness can be taken away by that vision" (Ackroyd, 1988a: 152).

According to mythical thought, the expulsion from paradise and the ensuing loss of contact with the divinity reduces man to a single plane of existence, his human nature. Therefore, after his "fall" into history, Man, incapable of remembering his divine origins, is prey to the materialistic single vision William Blake calls "Newton's sleep." Where in *Milton in America* Ackroyd fictionalizes the disastrous moral and material consequences of Milton's spiritual blindness, in an earlier novel, *Hawksmoor* (1988b), Ackroyd opposes the single vision of Sir Christopher Wren's empiricism to the *Scientia Umbrarum* of the black magician and architect, Nicholas Dyer. Just as Blake believed this life to be a shadow of the real life of the imagination, so Dyer believes that life is a punishment and the earth a prison from which he is yearning to escape. He also believes that man is condemned to endless reincarnations unless, in one life, he manages to perform a Great Work, similar to God's act of creation of the cosmos. Therefore, he devotes his life to the construction of a huge talisman made up of seven churches arranged in a septilateral pattern that replicates the pattern of the seven stars in the Pleiades. By this means, Dyer hopes to establish a current of sympathetic magic between heaven and earth that will function as a magical ladder to heaven that he might use to bring about his transcendental change.

[3] As Gabriel Josipovici recalls, the medieval writer does not seek originality. On the contrary, he defines himself as an imitator of the only two original books, written by God: The Book of Nature and the Book of Scriptures. Due to Man's fallen state, these Books are not immediately intelligible, but the spiritually developed Christian knows that they allow for two different levels of interpretation: the literal (or historical) and the spiritual (or analogical) (Josipovici, 1971: 35–36).

The novel ends in the twentieth century, with the meeting in the seventh church, Little St. Hugh, of Dyer's split black and white emanations: the tramp called "The Architect" and detective Nicholas Hawksmoor. From a mythical perspective, there is no doubt that Dyer has managed to reunify the fragmented facets of his split self and has achieved his ascesis. However, the fact that detective Hawksmoor finds Little St. Hugh only after reading Dyer's diary and also the fact that this church, unlike the other six, is fictional, gives a metafictional twist to the mythical reading, revealing the plane of being toward which Dyer has made his transcendental escape as a closed textual world, the book written by Peter Ackroyd, whose circularity and division into twelve chapters suggests its condition of closed (textual) cosmogony. Thus, in keeping with the dual interpretation of the book as imaginative and spiritual labyrinth, *Hawksmoor* simultaneously reveals itself as a closed textual Library of Babel and as a cabbalistic ladder of the Sephirot thrusting Dyer (and the reader willing to accept this magical — or analogical — interpretation as true) upward into eternity.

The message contained in *Hawksmoor*, therefore, is that the way out of the prison of language and out of the fall into history is one and the same: the acceptance of the visionary interpretation of reality. Before finding Dyer's diary, Detective Hawksmoor — like Sir Christopher Wren — suffers from the barren spiritual state characteristic of the single vision of materialism. In *First Light* (1990) the astronomer Damian Fall also suffers from the same type of spiritual blindness at the beginning of the novel. Reduced to his human nature, Fall cannot conceive of other planes of existence. Consequently, when he discovers the many coincidences between the findings of New Physics and the postulates of myth, he is panic-stricken with the realization that he is trapped within a symbol system that precludes his contact with reality. Therefore, for Damian the only solution is to abandon his materialistic single vision and accept Blake's contention that the human imagination has a transcendental capacity, that human representations of reality are true. This is the lesson Nicholas Dyer transmits to Nicholas Hawksmoor, and also the secret wisdom of the "Old Barren One" and the other prehistoric wise men in Pilgrin Valley, which has been passed from generation to generation of Mints by means of popular songs and ballads in *First Light*.

As in the earlier novels, in *First Light* the mythical and the metafictional elements are fused with each other in a way that simultaneously suggests the textual and the mythical nature of the world created. For example, some characters strikingly resemble earlier characters from

Thomas Hardy's novels, just as some characters in *The Great Fire of London* resemble Dickens's characters in *Little Dorrit*. Farmer and Boy Mint do not look like peasants, but rather clowns. Their clownishness and their inborn acting ability has been inherited by the last Mint, Joey Hanover, the retired London music-hall and television star who has come to the region with his wife, Floey, in search of his lost parents. Joey Hanover, who, like Hawksmoor and Fall, suffers from the single vision of materialism, reaches a true understanding of his origins on the day when, incapable of protecting the "Old Barren One" from the archaeologists, the Mints decide to set fire to the coffin. Watching the melting body, Joey has a vision of the wise man touching hands with his ancestors in a long line that stretches back to the "first light," the beginning of time, in a scene that echoes the vision of Chatterton, Meredith, and Wychwood with joined hands at the end of *Chatterton*.

In "London Luminaries and Cockney Visionaries" (1993a) Ackroyd explains that the particular visionary sensibility he is interested in is "a living inheritance" present in the art of music-hall comedians such as Dan Leno and Charles Mathews, of novelists and playwrights such as Henry Fielding and Charles Dickens, of painters such as Turner and Hogarth, and of poets such as William Blake. Accordingly, where in *First Light* Ackroyd makes Joey Hanover the inheritor of the ancestral wisdom of the prehistoric wise men, in a later novel, *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem* (1994), Ackroyd recreates Dan Leno himself as the music-hall "monopolylinguist" capable of putting an end to the cycle of evil brought about by the Industrial Revolution that has materialized in the appearance of a Limehouse Golem in the East End of London. Leno's way of exorcising the Golem is to transform it into a humorous and harmless music-hall transvestite character. After Leno's impersonation of the Golem, the chaotic phase comes to an end, order is restored, and life in London can begin a new cycle, for the city that has bred the Golem is also the city that has bred the comedian/magus capable of absorbing it and expelling it in the cathartic ritual of drama.

But the novel in which Ackroyd develops to the full the idea of the cathartic and healing power of visionaries is *English Music* (1992). The narrator-protagonist, Tim Harcombe, tells the story of his past life over a span of seventy years, alternating the story of his past actions with the trance-like dreams or visions that he — like Blake and also Dickens — has been subject to all his life. In an accurate materialization of the analogic interpretation of the book as spiritual labyrinth, Tim, during these trances, finds himself caught up in a textual labyrinth, made up of the books or pictures he has just read or contemplated. This visionary

world, like Borges's Library of Babel and also like the Worlds of Art reached by Wilde, Wychwood, Meredith, and Chatterton, is an all-encompassing textual world made up of the sum total of the English literary and artistic canon, while the chapter arrangement of the novel itself echoes the closed, though simultaneously infinite double loop structure of the major arcana of the Tarot, representing the Fool's physical and spiritual quest for individuation.

Tim has inherited his visionary and healing capacity from his father, a famous mesmerist named Clement Harcombe. But it is only at the end of the novel that Tim reconciles himself with his power and understands that it "belonged to neither of us separately, but resided in the very fact of inheritance itself" (1992: 378).[4] This sentence synthesizes the core of Clement Harcombe's teaching and is the idea around which Peter Ackroyd's novels invariably develop, the conviction that the power to transcend the limitations of this fallen world (and with it, the anxiety of influence) does not lie in the individual, but is rather a question of transhistorical connectedness.

After the death of Clement Harcombe, Tim, contemplating the smiling face of his dead father, unexpectedly sees a palimpsest of faces (like the faces beneath that of the "Unknown Man" in Charles Wychwood's picture in *Chatterton*, or beneath that of the "Old Barren One" in *First Light*), revealing the Harcombe lineage stretching "back to the beginning" (392). It is at this stage that Tim truly understands the meaning of his father's teachings, and this understanding miraculously transforms him from a clownish trickster with white make-up (like the Mints in *First Light*) into a "thought-reader" and a "ventriloquist" (396). That is, he becomes what Ackroyd would call a genuine Cockney music-hall monopolylinguist, like Joey Hanover and Dan Leno. Thus, at the end of the novel, Tim develops the capacity Ackroyd has been trying to achieve by absorbing and recasting the voices of his predecessors in his poetry, biographies, and fiction: the capacity to reproduce the sound of "English music," the imaginative human equivalent of the music of the spheres, the product of the sum total of the voices of every visionary English writer and artist. Thus *First Light*

[4] Tim's revelation echoes that of Bernard, the writer in Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*, when at the end of the novel he comes to a sense of his own identity as he realizes that he is not just the imitator of the great writers of the past, but their inheritor: "not Byron, Shelley, Dostoevsky, but I, Bernard . . . the inheritor; I, the continuer; I, the person miraculously appointed to carry it on" (1992: 169).

reveals itself in the final analysis both as a Borgesian Library of Babel and as Blake's Spiritual or Cosmic Body, a paradoxical textual/imaginary (or spiritual) world, trapping Ackroyd and the other individual writers in the English canon within its cardboard walls and simultaneously allowing them to live/write in unison in the eternal and sublime yet all too human (and, as Ackroyd insists, specifically English) World of Art created by the power of Ackroyd's imagination.

In *The House of Doctor Dee* (1993b) Ackroyd takes the same idea to an extreme, as the novel assumes the shape of Doctor Dee's hieroglyphic monad (his esoteric symbol of the cosmic Self/World) and reveals itself as a two-dimensional, yet infinite World/Book. This World/Book is the materialization of the spiritual body of a series of living creatures who can be seen either as *homunculi* or as *anthropoi*, as unfree literary characters caught up in a textual world, or as historical figures with visionary and magical powers, for, like the City/Book they inhabit and jointly beget, their nature strictly depends on the reader's ability to read it imaginatively, as fiction, or analogically, as numinous experience.[5]

In Ackroyd's revisionary recreations, then, the Central Form of his imagination is a mythical World/Text — like Blake's Albion/England — peopled both by spiritually blind and alienated characters suffering from the materialistic single vision of "Newton's sleep," who can only conceive selfhood/authorship in individualistic terms and are, therefore, trapped forever in the prison of language, ineffectually fighting their anxiety of influence, and by red-haired visionaries, comedians/magi who have preserved the memory of their stellar origins in popular songs and ballads and know that the way back to the stars can only be achieved though a collective act of the imagination. Characters such as Milton, who have lost touch with or reject the mythical and visionary wisdom of their forefathers invariably live in chaotic worlds and suffer from extreme self-fragmentation and alienation from society. Oscar Wilde, Charles Wychwood, and Daniel Fall have, like John Milton, visions of themselves separated from their bodies. However, unlike Milton or Elizabeth Cree, they eventually overcome their alienation and self-fragmentation and grow spiritually, after accepting the truth of

[5] The reader can gauge the centrality of this vision from a recent remark by Peter Ackroyd on occasion of the publication of *The Life of Thomas More*: "I think conventional biography is coming to an end of its natural life and I'm bored with fiction. I want to merge the two. My next book is a biography of London, written as if it is a person" (Standford, 1998: 26).

imaginative or visionary reality. Other characters, such as Clement and Tim Harcombe (or also Dan Leno, who uses the cathartic potential of laughter) are born with the visionary capacity to heal. For these characters, as for Nicholas Dyer and the "Old Barren One," visionary reality is much more real than the physical reality of life-in-time. Nicholas Dyer and Hawksmoor, Dan Leno and Elizabeth Cree, Karl Marx and Solomon Weil may be said to exist in a self/shadow or doppelgänger relationship; while the split selves (or black and white emanations) of Nicholas Dyer, the "Old Barren One," and Doctor Dee can travel separately across space and time in order to meet their posterior reincarnations and negotiate their cosmic integration. Invariably, these characters manage to put an end to their self-fragmentation and alienation when they realize that the power to transcend the limitations of this fallen world does not lie in the individual, but — as Oscar Wilde, the "Old Barren One," and the Mints, Christopher Dyer, Chatterton, Meredith, and Wychwood, Clement and Tim Harcombe, Doctor John Dee, Dan Leno, and the Catholics and Indians in *Milton in America* fully realize — is rather a question of transhistorical connectedness. For characters such as Tim Harcombe, Doctor Dee, and Dan Leno this realization also involves, as it did for Blake and More, the understanding of true love.

Similarly, whether the reader will understand this message of love and find his or her own transcendental ladder to heaven depends on his or her capacity to overcome the materialistic single vision and learn to read Ackroyd's novels not just literally, as fiction, but also analogically, as numinous experience.

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